







Dick stood up in the car and kept his eyes glued to the road ahead.

(The Boy Troopers on the Trail)

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THE BOY TROOPERS ON THE TRAIL

By CLAIR W. HAYES

AUTHOR OF

*"The Boy Allies Series," "The Boy Troopers in the
Northwest," "The Boy Troopers on Strike Duty,"
"The Boy Troopers Among the Wild
Mountaineers."*



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THE BOY TROOPERS SERIES

A Series of Stories for Boys 12 to 16 Years of Age

By CLAIR W. HAYES

The Boy Troopers on the Trail

The Boy Troopers in the Northwest

The Boy Troopers on Strike Duty

The Boy Troopers Among the Wild Mountaineers

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THE BOY TROOPERS ON THE TRAIL

CHAPTER I.

THE BROTHERS.

AWAKENED by a crash, Dick Hazelton sat up in bed and strained his ears. At sound of a second crash, he slipped quickly from between the sheets, slid his feet into a pair of tennis shoes, and, clad only in a pair of pajamas, stole out into the hall.

"Something wrong," he told himself as he reached the stairs and began to descend. "I've got to investigate."

Silently reaching the foot of the stairs he paused a moment, trying to locate the place from which the sound came. Even as he stood listening there came another crash as of broken glass, followed by a loud thump.

"Somebody in the parlor," he muttered. "Sounds like he had overturned the table."

Cautiously Dick moved along the hall, guiding himself in the darkness by touching the wall.

As he drew close to the parlor door, he caught sight of a ray of light through the keyhole.

"Making himself at home, whoever he is," said Dick to himself. "I'd better be careful."

At the door he paused and put his eye to the keyhole. Through it he saw a sight which sent his heart into his mouth. Without hesitation he threw open the door and leaped inside.

"Hold him, Tom!" he shouted. "I'm coming!"

Of two figures struggling on the floor, one was that of his elder brother.

On top of him was a desperate appearing man, who was using all his strength to seize his brother by the throat.

Stirred to renewed effort by Dick's sudden entrance—which for the moment also startled his opponent—Tom Hazelton made a desperate effort and threw off his enemy.

"Get out of here, Dick," he cried as he sprang to his feet, "I can handle this fellow! It's no place for you!"

The words had scarcely left his mouth when his adversary again sprang at him.

In another instant they were engaged in a fierce struggle.

Now Dick had all the confidence in the world in

his brother's ability to take care of himself in a rough and tumble. Nevertheless he stood his ground, ready to lend a hand should the occasion arise.

And presently such an occasion offered itself.

When the two men grappled, it appeared for several seconds that the advantage was with Tom, a stalwart young man of twenty-five, who had proved his ability as an athlete in many ways. Unexpectedly, however, conditions changed.

By a quick movement Tom's opponent thrust out his right foot. It caught Tom in the back of his knees, and with a strong push sent him staggering.

In vain Tom endeavored to steady himself. He went over backward with a crash and in an instant his adversary was on top of him.

Tom ceased to struggle and lay perfectly still.

Dick instantly detected the cause of his brother's condition. In falling, Tom's head had struck the edge of the table and for the moment the stranger in the Hazelton house was master of the situation.

But it was for a moment only.

With a cry of anger, Dick sprang to the table, seized a heavy paperweight and, before Tom's opponent could protect himself, brought his improvised weapon down upon the man's head with all the force he could put into the blow.

The struggle was over. It had ended so sud-

denly that Dick stepped back aghast. For a moment he shuddered at thought of what he had done; but it was for a moment only.

Stooping down he dragged the body of his victim aside and then knelt beside his brother.

Already consciousness was returning to Tom and directly he sat up and rubbed his head. His eye fell on the prostrate form of his late adversary.

"Hello," he said. "So I did for him before I went under, eh? Guess it's a good thing I did or he would have got away while I was lying here unconscious."

"Well," said Dick briefly, "you want to thank me that he's still here."

"That so?" asked Tom. "What did you have to do with it?"

"I walloped him with this paperweight," replied Dick, indicating the weapon, which he had replaced on the table.

"Jove!" said Tom, getting to his feet. "Is that so? You must have walloped him pretty hard."

"Seems to me that was the thing to do," returned Dick.

"So it was," agreed his brother. "But let's have a look at him."

He stooped over, picked the unconscious man up in his arms, and deposited him on a sofa in one

corner of the room. Then he examined the wound Dick had inflicted.

"Nothing serious," was his diagnosis at last. "He'll come to in a few minutes. Dick, get me some water and a towel."

Dick followed his brother's instructions and upon his return helped bathe and dress the man's head.

"Who is he? he asked of his brother.

"Name of Tompkins," was Tom's reply, "although he'll probably deny it. He's wanted in connection with the robbery of the First National Bank in Johnstown. I learned there yesterday that he had headed for Harrisburg and trailed him. I ran across him on Market street tonight and followed him across the bridge. He was headed this way so I waited until we were almost here before nailing him."

"How'd he get in the house?" Dick wanted to know.

"I'm coming to that. When I grabbed him he seemed quiet enough. I brought him in here to phone for the patrol wagon and while I was at the phone he tackled me. I guess you heard the rest of it."

"I did," said Dick, "and a good thing for you, too."

"Right you are, youngster; but our man is coming to again. We'll see what he has to say."

He sat down and eyed his prisoner as the other slowly sat up on the sofa.

"Well, Tompkins, how do you feel?" he asked.

The other scowled.

"My name's not Tompkins," he growled, "but my head hurts."

"It should," agreed Tom. "My kid brother here dropped a paperweight on it. A little pain naturally follows such a procedure."

The man called Tompkins glared at Dick.

"I'll remember that," he threatened. "I'll repay you with interest some day."

Dick smiled.

"My address'll be the same for some years, I guess," he replied. "Look me up when you come to town again, though I don't think you'll return soon."

"Right again, youngster," said Tom with a laugh. "For the next few years I believe the address of our friend Tompkins will be the state penitentiary; so when he pays his return visit I guess you'll be big enough to take care of yourself."

"I'm big enough for that now," declared Dick.

Tom shrugged.

"Don't get cocky, youngster," he advised. "You're only a bantam as yet and you're 'way out of your class. Now, you stay here and watch this fellow. I'll phone for the patrol wagon."

He stepped into the hall.

But again it appeared that Tom had reckoned without his host—had counted his chickens before they were hatched.

Hardly had Tom stepped from the parlor than Tompkins came suddenly to his feet and made a rush at Dick.

“No you don’t,” said Dick, and dodged.

Tompkins made no second effort to reach the lad. Instead, he stepped quickly across the floor and smashed in the front window pane with a single blow of his fist. Before Dick could again seize the paperweight, which quick thought prompted him to hurl after the fugitive, the man jumped through the window into the darkness.

“Quick, Tom!” shouted Dick. “He’s gone!”

And without thought of the danger he might encounter without, he leaped through the window after him.

By the time Tom could return to the parlor, both Tompkins and his brother had disappeared. Tom uttered an angry exclamation.

“That kid’ll get into trouble, sure,” he told himself; “and it’s my fault. I had no business leaving them alone. Well, I’ll have to catch them; that’s all.”

He followed the others through the window.

When Dick stepped upon the porch Tompkins

was descending the porch steps four at a time. At the bottom, he wheeled and dashed down Crescent street toward Oak.

Dick followed him.

"Hi there!" the lad shouted. "Stop!"

The fugitive only seemed to run the faster.

Dick sprinted, and gained on Tompkins. Then he slowed down again.

"I can't tackle him," he told himself. "He'd make mincemeat of me. Guess I'll just keep him in sight."

Behind him Dick heard his brother's footsteps as Tom joined the chase, and knowing that assistance was close at hand, he sprinted again.

Across the long curved bridge over the Pennsylvania railroad tracks ran pursuers and pursued. At the foot of the bridge Tompkins turned abruptly and dashed into the railroad yards.

"By George! We'll lose him here if we don't look sharp," was Dick's muttered exclamation. "If a train should come along now, and should come between us—"

And what the lad feared came to pass.

There came the blast of a locomotive whistle and a fiery eye gleamed in the darkness close at hand.

Tompkins crossed the track ahead of the engine by a desperate spring, and was shut from Dick's view by a roaring string of freight cars.

For a moment Dick hesitated. Then, with a cry over his shoulder to his brother, he grasped the rail of a passing car and swung aboard. It was the matter of a moment to crawl across the car, and a moment later the lad dropped to the ground on the other side.

Tom, who had seen his brother's action, exclaimed:

"Confound that youngster. He'll be killed sure."

He ran alongside the train, prepared to swing aboard himself.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE TRAIL.

RICHARD HAZELTON, at the time this story opens, was a lad of fifteen. All his life he had lived in Harrisburg, the capital city of Pennsylvania. At the time this story opens he had just completed his third year in high school.

It was the month of June, and Dick had just started in upon his summer vacation.

Despite his lack of years, Dick was well developed physically. In stature he had almost reached

his full growth, being only a couple of inches under six feet. He was sturdy and strong.

Always athletically inclined, Dick had reached a point where he could hold his own with boys farther advanced in years in a rough and tumble, or with his fists. In fact, he had often expressed the belief that there were few among his brother Tom's friends with whom he would be afraid to take issue.

Ever since Dick had been large enough to face his brother, the two, had very frequently engaged in boxing and wrestling bouts. Of course Dick was no match for Tom in either sport, although as the years passed he grew harder and harder for Tom to master.

Dick's particular chum and classmate was Ralph Harkness. Ralph, the day following the closing of school, had gone to Pittsburgh to visit his aunt and uncle. There Dick was to join him the following week. The two boys planned to spend at least a month in the "Smoky City" before returning home to complete their vacation.

Dick's father and mother were in Washington. Mr. Hazelton, who owned one of the city's smaller drygoods stores, had gone east to buy goods and was returning by way of the nation's capital. With Mrs. Hazelton, he was spending several days in Washington.

Dick's brother Tom was a member of the Penn-

sylvania State Police—or the Mounted Constabulary—as the force was more familiarly known to the people of the state. Graduating from college several years before, he had chosen to devote the next period of life to running down the lawbreakers in the state—this in spite of his father's protests. Mr. Hazelton, for a short time, had been insistent that Tom go into his store and learn the business which would be turned over to him some day.

But Tom had been adamant, so his father had at last given his consent.

In the line of duty, Tom was absent from home most of the time, but upon the rare occasions where he spent a few days in Harrisburg he was wont to regale Dick with such thrilling stories that Dick himself had often expressed the desire to follow in his brother's footsteps.

But to all such talk, Mr. Hazelton turned a deaf ear; Tom also advised strongly against it.

"It's a great life," he often said, "but one member of the Hazelton family in the troop is enough."

"Then," said his father, "you do wrong to relate these so-called thrilling stories to Dick."

"Oh, I don't know," replied Tom. "He likes to hear 'em. I guess he'll forget 'em by the time he is old enough to think seriously of what he wants to do."

But in this, as Dick knew, his brother was wrong.

Now, the Pennsylvania mounted police—state troopers they are often called—is perhaps one of the most famous bodies of men in the United States. For years they have been the terror of lawbreakers in the Keystone state, over which they roam, north, east, south and west,—either on horseback, or, of later years, on motorcycles. A systematic patrol is maintained continually. For efficiency in patrol work, the state is divided into sections, to each of which a troop is assigned, all acting under orders from state headquarters.

The headquarters of Troop G to which Tom Hazelton was attached, was located at Lancaster, but at the time this story opens Tom had been detailed to the special assignment of helping to discover and arrest the men who had been implicated in the robbery of the First National Bank of Johnstown.

Of course, search for the culprits was being made in other parts of the state; but word having been flashed to troop headquarters in Lancaster that the men had been heard of in that section, Captain Mahon of Troop G had assigned Tom to the case as the best man for this particular kind of work.

The trail was now almost a week old, as already narrated, Tom had been successful in picking it up in Johnstown and had followed his quarry to Harrisburg, with the result as seen. Now, as he swung

aboard the freight train that separated him from Tompkins and Dick, he determined to take no further chances with the fugitive, should fortune again deliver him into his hands.

When Tom dropped to the ground on the other side of the train, Dick, safe despite the speed the train was making when he swung from it, was again running rapidly after Tompkins, whom he could see some distance down the track.

"I'm going to tackle him regardless of consequences, if I can come up with him," Dick panted under his breath as he dashed along in the semi-darkness. "Hello! There he goes across the tracks. I'll have to look sharp or I'll lose him if another train comes along."

He increased his pace and gained on the fugitive.

A moment later Tompkins swerved abruptly and ran toward the not-far-distant passenger station.

Despite the best effort Dick could put forth, the man reached the station and climbed aboard a train that was just moving out, before Dick could come up with him.

With a last effort Dick spurted for the train and reached it only to have the vestibule closed in his face.

Dick paused, helpless.

"Now, that's what I call tough luck," he de-

clared as the train slid by him, gradually gaining momentum.

But there was nothing the lad could do. He turned and retraced his steps, and presently, in the darkness beyond the train shed, espied Tom, making toward the station as rapidly as possible.

"Where'd he go?" demanded Tom, stopping beside his brother.

"Hopped a train," replied Dick. "I tried to get aboard, but he closed the vestibule in my face."

"Which way?" asked Tom.

"West; on the Pittsburgh express, I think."

"He can't get off this side of Altoona, then," declared Tom. "I'll wire ahead and have him nabbed there. Come on."

He led the way quickly toward the telegraph office in the station waiting room, where he dispatched the following message:

"Chief of Police,

"Altoona, Pa.—Rodney Tompkins, wanted Johnstown National Bank robbery due Altoona aboard Pittsburgh express at 11:40. Arrest and hold. Grey suit, black shoes, panama hat. Smooth face. Forty years old. Hazelton, Pennsylvania mounted."

"There," he said after passing the message to the operator, "that ought to get him."

"And what are you going to do?" demanded Dick.

"Catch the next train and go after him," was Tom's reply.

Then as he raised his eyes and took a good look at Dick, he burst into a laugh.

"Say youngster!" he exclaimed, "don't you think it would be a pretty good idea for you to go home and get into bed before daylight. Pajamas are all right for chasing burglars in the dark, but they don't look very well about a railway station."

Dick joined in the laughter.

"I had clean forgotten what I had on in the excitement," he said. "It's a mighty good thing I happened to slip on my tennis shoes, I'd have had hard running over the cinders if I'd been barefooted."

He started to leave the station and then stopped in his tracks. He had been struck with a brilliant idea.

"Say, Tom," he exclaimed as he slowly retraced his steps, "what's the matter taking me along with you to Altoona?"

"What? In that garb?"

"Oh, I've plenty of time to go home and dress before train time."

"But what's the idea?" insisted Tom.

"Well," replied Dick, "I've been mixed up in this case a little bit and I'd like to see it through."

"And what do you think Dad would have to say about it?" demanded Tom with a smile.

"I guess he'd object if he were here," was Dick's answer. "But fortunately he's not. Come on now, Tom."

For a moment Tom turned the matter over in his mind.

"I guess it won't hurt anything," he decided at last. "Tompkins will be safe enough when we get there, and all I'll have to do is to take him on to Johnstown in the morning. If there were any danger attached I would say no on the instant, but I guess there is nothing to be afraid of."

"I know there isn't," agreed Dick.

"All right, then. I'll get you a ticket."

While waiting for the next train, the two repaired to the Hazelton residence where they did full justice to rather an elaborate meal out of the ice-box. Two hours later found them aboard a train speeding toward Altoona, which they were due to reach shortly after 2 o'clock in the morning.

Despite the fact that it was far beyond his bedtime hour, Dick was so excited by the events of the past few hours that he was unable to follow his brother's example and sleep. He turned the affair over in his mind until the brakeman called, "Altoona!"

"Well," here we are," said Tom, just as though

he had been awake all the time. "Let's get out."

They moved to the platform and waited until the train stopped. Alighting a moment later they made their way through the deserted streets from the station to the Colonial hotel, several blocks away.

"Might as well get fixed up for a few hour's sleep," Tom explained. "Then we'll go to police headquarters, see that they have our man safely, and turn in. I'll leave him in a cell overnight, and take him on in the morning. You can go home then."

"Can't I go to Johnstown with you, so I can have company on the way back home?" asked Dick.

Tom shook his head.

"I think not, he replied. "It's entirely possible that after I reach Johnstown I'll be ordered to report some place else. I may not get back to Harrisburg for a week."

With this Dick was forced to be content.

The two brothers were shown to a pleasantly appointed room.

"Suits us for to-night, I guess," remarked Tom. "Eh, Dick?"

"Right, Tom," Dick agreed.

"Then we'll go to headquarters," said Tom, "unless you'd rather turn in?" and he looked at Dick inquiringly.

"Not much," said Dick decisively. "I'm going to stick on this case just as long as I can."

"All right, youngster," rejoined Tom. "Come on, then."

It was only a short walk to headquarters, Dick entered close on Tom's heels.

"Chief in?" inquired Tom of the desk sergeant.

"At this hour?" demanded the sergeant. "Not likely."

"I'm Hazelton of the mounted," Tom went on. "Wired from Harrisburg about the Johnstown bank robbery a few hours ago. Did you get my man?"

Tom stepped back in dismay at the sergeant's reply.

"Nope," he said. "We nailed him, all right, but he gave my men the slip in the yards!"

CHAPTER III.

THE TRAIL LEADS TO PITTSBURGH.

TOM sat down abruptly in the nearest chair. The desk sergeant grinned.

"Don't take it so hard," he admonished. "Accidents will happen, you know."

"So I perceive," said Tom dryly. "Why didn't you catch him?"

"Tried," said the sergeant, "but you know it's pretty dark in those yards. Man with a little start can disappear pretty quick."

"The thing I don't see," said Tom, "is just how he got that start. Why didn't you get him before he got off the train?"

"We had him," declared the sergeant, "but maybe you'll tell me what to do when a man goes through a car window?"

"Go after him," said Tom.

"Trouble is we don't have that kind of men on the force," said the desk sergeant. "My men are more or less given to avoirdupois. Neither are they noted for speed, and by the time they could get out the door, your man had disappeared. It's too bad!"

"So it is," Tom agreed, "but it can't be helped now. You don't have any idea where he went?"

"No; but the chances are he'll hop a freight to-night, though it's possible he may lie around until morning."

"All right, sergeant," said Tom. "Much obliged just the same. Come, Dick, we may as well turn in."

In spite of himself during Tom's conversation with the sergeant, Dick had felt his spirits rising. He was perfectly well aware of the fact that he should sympathize with his brother in his misfortune; but he simply could not do it.

"It's not over after all," he kept telling himself. "Maybe I won't have to go right home."

Nevertheless he said nothing of these thoughts to his brother as they walked back to their hotel, and he went to bed still thinking of Tompkins and the possibility that he might remain longer "on the trail."

As Dick slept he dreamed; and his dream had to do with Tompkins, and other law breakers. When he awoke with the sunlight streaming in his eyes it was with the lure of the chase still fresh in his mind.

He glanced to the opposite side of the room, where Tom should have been sleeping. Tom was not there.

Dick jumped out of his bed and looked at his watch.

"Eight thirty," he said. "I should have been up an hour ago. Doesn't look as though I would make much of a state trooper. Wonder where Tom went, anyhow."

As he glanced about the room, his eyes fell upon a note on the table. He opened it.

"Gone out for breakfast," Tom's message read. "Didn't want to disturb you. Will be back by 9:30."

"Guess I'll go down and eat a bite myself," Dick told himself.

He dressed and went downstairs. Instead of going into the dining room, he passed out upon the street in search of a restaurant. His footsteps led him toward the station.

"Might as well eat here, I guess," he muttered, and approached the lunch counter.

And as he did so the sight of a figure just going through the train gate arrested his attention and sent his heart into his throat.

"Tompkins, or I'm dreaming!" he exclaimed.

Forgotten on the instant was the lad's hunger. He ran toward the gate and would have passed through had he not been halted by the gateman, who demanded:

"Ticket."

"Where does that train go to?" demanded Dick.

"Pittsburgh," replied the gateman. "First stop Johnstown, but you'll have to have a ticket if you want to get aboard."

But Dick had not heard his last words. He was dashing toward the ticket office.

Fortunately, Dick always carried a small amount of money with him, and slapping a five dollar bill on the window he called for a ticket to Johnstown.

Then, sweeping the change into his pocket, he hurried back to the train.

"You'll have to hurry," said the gateman and

Dick dashed for the train, which already was moving.

Dick found a seat and sat down. For a moment he turned the situation over in his mind.

"He'll probably get off at Johnstown," he reasoned, "but if he doesn't I'll have to go on to Pittsburgh. I'm not going to lose sight of him if I can help it. If he gets off at Johnstown I'll have time to wire Tom. I'll probably have time even if he doesn't get off there and can wire Tom I am going on to Pittsburgh. I'll tell him to hunt me up at Ralph's uncle's."

After the conductor had taken his ticket, Dick bethought himself to make sure that Tompkins was on the train. Pulling his cap well down over his eyes, he moved into the smoking car, thinking to begin his search there.

Dick knew that there was very little possibility of Tompkins recognizing him, but he realized that it was best to be on the safe side. Accordingly he acted with caution.

From the front of the smoking car he walked slowly along the aisle scanning each face as he did so. Toward the rear of the car he saw a figure slumped down in a seat, face half averted. Even at that distance something told him that the man was Tompkins.

Dick was right, as he made certain on closer

inspection, taking extreme care that he himself was not observed scanning the other too closely.

"Well, my search has ended, at all events," the lad told himself. "Now if I can just keep him in sight."

He sank down in a seat several removed from Tompkins and kept his eyes glued upon the fugitive.

At last the conductor called Johnstown. Dick was instantly on the alert; but Tompkins showed no signs of moving, only huddled down closer in his seat.

"Afraid of being recognized," Dick muttered. "Well, he's not going to get off here; that's sure."

From his pocket he produced a notebook and pencil. He scribbled upon a leaf and then tore it out.

"Messengers usually go through the trains here," he told himself. "But if one doesn't I'm out of luck; and Tom will be worried."

But fortune was with Dick.

Hardly had the train stopped when a boy in a blue uniform appeared, crying:

"Telegrams!"

Dick glanced at the message quickly before giving it to the boy with half a dollar.

"Following Tompkins to Pittsburgh," it read. "Find me with Ralph," and gave the Pittsburgh address. "Hurry."

"There; that's done," said Dick as the boy de-

parted with the message. "Now for another long wait."

Presently the train started again and Dick sank back in his seat. He paid his fare when the conductor came around, and then gave his undivided attention to Tompkins.

But in spite of the best efforts the lad put forth to keep awake, he several times caught himself drowsing; and at last, rocked by the motion of the train and swept by the cooling breeze that came through the open window, he fell asleep.

So the train passed through Latrobe and Greensburg, making stops at both towns, and Dick still slept.

Nearly two hours later the lad came to himself with a start. The brakeman was crying "East Liberty."

Dick glanced toward where Tompkins had sat. The man was gone. Dick's heart leaped into his throat and he jumped to his feet and dashed to the platform. But as he left the door he stopped suddenly, for there, waiting for the train to stop, was Tompkins.

Dick breathed a sigh of relief.

"Almost lost him," he muttered.

Gradually the train slowed down and before it could stop Tompkins jumped off and hurried along

the platform. Dick, his cap still pulled well down over his eyes, followed him.

Fortunately for Dick, Tompkins must have thought he had eluded all pursuit, for he did not so much as glance around once to see whether he was followed. Dick kept as close behind him as he felt safe.

Tompkins climbed the steps to the street and caught a Frankstown Road car toward Pittsburgh. By a sprint, Dick also managed to get aboard and took a rear seat. Tompkins sat well up in front.

At the Pennsylvania railroad station in Pittsburgh Tompkins alighted. So did Dick.

"Great Scott! Hope he's not going to get another train," Dick said under his breath. "I haven't got money enough to go much farther. Besides, if he gets out of the state we can't bring him back without a lot of red tape."

But, as it developed, Dick's fears were groundless.

The boy followed Tompkins from the station, down the long approach, along Liberty street to Smithfield and thence to Fifth avenue, where Tompkins turned again. Here the chase ended for the moment. Tompkins turned into a restaurant.

"Thank goodness," muttered Dick, as he too entered and took a seat at some distance from Tompkins.

He gave an order, then went to the telephone in a booth at one side of the room.

It was the work of but a few minutes to get his chum, Ralph Harkness, on the telephone.

"Ralph," he said, talking quickly, "I'm in a restaurant at Fifth avenue and Smithfield street. I'm trailing a man Tom is trying to catch. Maybe you can help."

"You bet I can," came Ralph's voice over the phone. "I'll be right there as quick as a car can get me there."

"That won't be quick enough, I'm afraid," said Dick. "There's a garage across the street from you. Get some one to bring you in a machine."

"Right," said Ralph.

"Wait a minute," said Dick. "Bring some money along, will you? I'm running low and we may need some before this chase ends."

"Right," came Ralph's voice again, and the receiver clicked on the hook.

Dick also replaced the receiver and returned to his table, where a girl was just placing his order. Across the room Dick could see Tompkins preparing to do justice to ham and eggs.

"Now if Ralph just gets here in time," the lad muttered, as he turned his attention to two fried eggs and a cup of coffee.

CHAPTER IV.

RALPH ARRIVES IN TIME.

KEEPING one eye on Tompkins, Dick heeded the cravings of the inner man. It was now after noon, and having gone without his breakfast, the lad was extremely hungry.

From Tompkin's actions Dick could see that the former also had been without food for some time. Having finished his first order of ham and eggs, Tompkins called for a second. Dick fortified himself with a second cup of coffee. He drank it slowly in order that he might not finish too long before Tompkins; then the lad made his way to the cashier's desk and paid his check.

Leaving the restaurant, he took up his stand a few feet away, his cap well over his eyes. He now found himself keeping a double vigil—one for Tompkins when that worthy emerged from the restaurant, and a second for Ralph, whom he expected at almost any minute.

Fortune was with Dick, for Ralph arrived first.

A taxicab, apparently ignoring all traffic laws, wheeled on to Fifth avenue from Smithfield street and drew up before the restaurant. A figure leaped

out quickly and would have entered had not Dick stayed him with a cry.

"Ralph!" he called.

Ralph came toward Dick and the two lads clasped hands.

Still keeping an eye on the restaurant door, Dick outlined the situation to his chum in a few brief words.

"Fine," was Ralph's comment. "I've always had a desire to mix in something like this, and here's my chance. Tell me, Dick what are you going to do?"

"I don't know exactly," replied Dick. "But I'm going to keep my eye on this fellow if it's humanly possible. I wired Tom from Johnstown to look for me at your uncle's here, so he should arrive before long."

"Trouble is, we may not be there then," remarked Ralph.

"I've thought of that. If we can track Tompkins to some place where he puts up for the night, we may be able to let Tom know in time."

"Right," Ralph agreed.

"By the way," said Dick. "How about money? Did you bring any?"

"I did," replied Ralph, reaching in his trousers pocket and producing a roll of bills. "There's a hundred dollars in this roll. As you know, I have

been saving for a long time, and it's a good thing, too."

"So it is," agreed Dick. "Well, you'd better give me about half of it."

The transfer was made, and then Ralph spoke again.

"I've got something else that may come in handy, too," he said.

"What is it?" demanded Dick.

"A pair of revolvers. Remember the pair my uncle sent me for my last birthday?"

"Yes."

"They're the ones. They are loaded, too, and I've an extra supply of cartridges in my pocket."

"Then we'd better split up on them too," declared Dick.

Taking care that no one should see him, Ralph passed one of the revolvers to Dick and gave him a handfull of cartridges.

"Now," said Dick, "as Tom would say—we're all set. Be ready to follow me when Tompkins comes out. Try and get a look at him if possible, so you will recognize him again."

Ralph nodded his understanding and took up a position a short distance from the door, where he scanned every face that passed.

At last Tompkins emerged. Ralph recognized the man from Dick's description. Tompkins turned

toward Smithfield street. Dick followed. Ralph rejoined his chum and the two lads took up the chase together.

Tompkins walked along Smithfield street toward Fourth avenue. He passed Third and Second, with the lads still close behind him.

"I'm pretty well acquainted in Pittsburgh," said Dick, "but I'll have to leave direction to you Ralph. You know more about this city than I do."

"Stick to me and you won't get lost," replied Ralph with a grin. "Without knowing, I should say that our man is making either for the Baltimore and Ohio or the Lake Erie depot."

"That means that he may be figuring on getting out of the state, eh?" asked Dick.

"It all depends," was Ralph's reply. "He may get out on either road, of course. Then again, he may be simply going to one of the nearby towns."

The latter turned out to be the case.

Tompkins entered the Baltimore and Ohio station and went directly to the ticket window.

"Get close and find out where's he's going," said Dick hurriedly. "He might recognize me."

Ralph fell in line behind Tompkins and heard the latter ask for a ticket to Connellsville. Ralph bought two tickets and returned to Dick.

Five minutes later the two lads boarded the train

behind Tompkins and took seats close to him in the smoker.

"We've got him in sight for an hour and a half, anyhow," said Ralph.

"Unless the ticket is a blind," Dick agreed. "He may drop off some place."

"He may," Ralph agreed, "but I don't believe he will."

Ralph was right.

Tompkins continued to Connellsville. There, after leaving the train, he hurried toward a street car standing near the depot. The car was marked Greensburg. A great light dawned on Dick.

"By George! He's simply doubling on his tracks," he declared. "Find out how long before that car starts, Ralph."

Ralph asked no questions, but hastened to obey.

"Ten minutes," he repeated a moment later.

"Good," ejaculated Dick. "Time enough. Now you stay here and keep your eye on him."

Dick hastened back in the station, where he had noticed a telegraph office as he came through. There he indicted a telegram to Tom at the address of Ralph's uncle in Pittsburgh. Then he returned to Ralph, and the lads climbed aboard the car.

"Where'd you go?" demanded Ralph, as the car started.

"Sent a telegram to Tom," was Dick's reply.

"Oh. What did you say?"

"Told him to catch the first train back to Harrisburg—that our man was headed that way."

"By George! I believe you figured it out," exclaimed Ralph. "Our man is simply crossing to Greensburg to catch the Pennsylvania back to Harrisburg."

"Precisely. Now it will take us an hour and a half at least to get there. If Tom gets my wire he should catch the first train. It may be the first train to pass through Greensburg after we get there."

"And it may not," said Ralph.

"That's true enough. But if it is and Tom is aboard our friend Tompkins won't be free much longer."

"Did you make it clear to Tom that we are following Tompkins to Greensburg?"

"Of course. I've a few more brains than you seem to give me credit for."

"I just wanted to know," said Ralph apologetically.

But this time fortune was not with the lads. They reached Greensburg without having been noticed by Tompkins and followed him aboard a Harrisburg-bound train half an hour later.

Dick feared that Tom, in Pittsburgh, had not had time to catch this flyer, but nevertheless, leav-

ing Ralph to keep an eye on Tompkins in the smoker, he made a tour of the train.

Tom was not aboard.

"We'll just have to keep an eye on him until something turns up," he told Ralph upon his return.

It was after dark when the train reached Harrisburg. The lads followed Tompkins closely as he left the train and ascended the stairs to the station. This was not hard to do because of the crowd, and there was little possibility that the lads would be recognized.

Tompkins led the way along Market street toward the river. He turned north on Fourth street, walked past the Capitol and passed to Sixth street, where he continued north.

In the darkness the two lads kept closer to him than they would have dared in the light of day, but luck was with them. It appeared that Tompkins was certain he had shaken off all possible pursuit, for not once did he so much as turn and glance behind him.

At Herr Street Tompkins paused. Then, for the first time, he looked around. Dick and Ralph shrank into a convenient doorway. Apparently satisfied, Tompkins crossed the street and entered the door of what Dick and Ralph knew was an apartment house.

Apparently the chase was at an end. The lads

realized that it would be dangerous for them to enter the apartment close on the heels of Tompkins, so there was nothing to do but to wait until they were certain he was out of sight.

Then they went in.

Dick accosted the young colored boy on the elevator.

"Did Mr. Tompkins go to his room?" he asked.

"Tompkins? questioned the boy. "There is no Mistah Tompkins hyah."

"I mean the man who just went up," said Dick.

"Oh," said the colored boy. "He went to see Mistah Martin in Apahtment 310."

"That's where we want to go, then," said Dick. "I understand from Mr. Tompkins that he lived here himself."

"No suh," said the boy, "but get in, I'll take you up."

The lads did so, and a moment later stepped off at the third floor.

"Fust apahtment to the left around the corner, there," said the boy, pointing.

He closed the elevator gate and the car descended.

"Now what?" demanded Ralph of Dick in a whisper. "We're up here, but you don't mean to go right in, do you?"

"If we can get in," declared Dick. "I'll tell you,

Ralph, we've played this game too long. Tompkins may stay in there all night, and he may not. There are two of us, and there is only one of him. Besides, we are armed and know how to shoot if we have to. I'm in favor of forcing things a bit."

"I'm game if you are," declared Ralph. "Lead the way, general."

They made their way quickly along the hall and stopped in front of apartment No. 310. Without hesitation, Dick tried the knob. The door was locked. Making sure that his revolver was ready in his pocket, he rapped sharply.

"Who's there?" came a voice from within. Steps crossed toward the door.

Dick braced himself for a rush.

CHAPTER V.

A STRUGGLE.

JUST inside the door the footsteps halted; a hand fumbled with the knob.

"Who's there?" came again in Tompkins' voice.

With a finger to his lip Dick cautioned Ralph to silence.

The lads heard the key turn in the lock and a moment later the door opened a crack. Instantly Dick thrust his foot against it and both boys threw their weight against the door, forcing it inward.

In vain Tompkins sought to close the door again. His strength was not as great as that of Dick and Ralph combined. The door was gradually forced inward.

Realizing at last that he could not keep his unwelcome visitors out, Tompkins suddenly stepped back. Dick and Ralph, unable to check themselves, so unexpected was this move, were tumbled into the room as though shot from a catapult, and for a moment Tompkins held them at disadvantage.

Stepping across the floor he slammed the door shut, and, with his back against it, produced a revolver, with which he covered the two lads. One glance at Tompkins' face and Dick knew the man recognized him. His first words confirmed this.

"My time has come much sooner than I expected, you young meddler," he said. "May I ask what you are doing here?"

"I'm here to make sure that you don't get away," declared Dick, betraying not the slightest sign of fear. "I've followed you all the way to Pittsburgh and back, so you needn't think I shall lose sight of you now."

"Pittsburgh and back!" exclaimed Tompkins.

"You mean you have been on my trail all that time?"

"I do."

"Then it is up to me to get you out of the way," declared Tompkins. "It appears that you are dangerous in spite of your youth. And who is this young fellow with you?"

"My chum," returned Dick, "though I can't see that it's any of your business."

"Can't eh?" said Tompkins. "You'll change your tune before I'm through with you."

Before Dick could reply, had such been his intention, the three caught the sound of footsteps in the hall. They approached the room in which the three stood, then passed on.

It seemed to Dick that Tompkins had manifested strange interest in the sound of footsteps; it was almost as though he had been expecting some one. A moment later Tompkins verified the lad's suspicions.

"I'm expecting some friends," he said, "and I don't want to be bothered with you. Guess I'll tie you up. Take your coat off"—this to Dick—"I'll dispose of you first."

Dick did as commanded; there was nothing else the lad could do.

Quickly Tompkins seized the lad's coat and ap-

proached him, his intent being to bind the lad's arms with his own garment.

But Tompkins had not reckoned on Ralph.

For one moment he had relaxed his vigilance, and in that moment Ralph had whipped out his revolver and covered him.

"Hands up!" he said quietly to Tompkins.

The man staggered back in consternation, his weapon pointing toward the floor. For an instant it appeared that he would obey Ralph's command, but it was for an instant only. Then, apparently reassured because of the youth of his adversary, his arm came up.

Ralph's face paled a trifle. It was all very well to point a gun at a man and tell him to put up his hands, but he found it was another matter when it came to pressing the trigger, although his own life might be endangered, as it appeared to be at this moment.

He still held his revolver levelled firmly enough, but he couldn't fire, although he knew he should. Gradually Tompkins' pistol pointed each second a trifle higher.

When Ralph had covered Tompkins, Dick had expected the man to drop his own weapon, but when he failed to do so and raised his weapon, Dick realized that it was time to take the situation into his own hands. Just as it appeared that Tompkins

would press the trigger, and while Ralph seemed to be paralyzed, Dick hurled himself forward in an old-time football tackle.

He caught Tompkins with both arms just below the knees, and the two went down in a struggling heap. The man's revolver went spinning through the air, and but for Tompkin's superior strength, the two were on even terms.

But in this kind of fighting Dick was bound to get the worst of it, for he was no match for his antagonist despite his own sturdy build.

Tompkins caught the lad's throat with his left hand, and drew back his right fist to strike. But before he could deliver the blow, Ralph, discarding his revolver, sprang forward and caught Tompkins' right arm in both hands and twisted with all his power.

Tompkins gave a cry of pain and Dick felt the hold on his throat relax. Instantly he squirmed from beneath Tompkins and sprang to his feet.

By this time Ralph and Tompkins were locked in a close embrace and were rolling over and over upon the floor. Because of his quickness, Ralph had been able to plant two solid blows in Tompkins' face, but these, instead of disabling his foe, had only served to increase the man's fury.

In seeking to gain a position where he could deliver a decisive blow, Tompkins exposed his face

to Dick, who was circling round and round looking for a place to strike. Dick dashed in and out again, but his fist had gone home and Tompkins gave a cry of pain.

At the same time Ralph struck twice quickly again and both blows found their mark, one on Tompkins' nose and the other in the pit of the stomach.

It was probably the last blow that settled the fight. It took all the battle out of Tompkins and he doubled up and rocked himself back and forth on the floor.

Before he could get his breath Dick had regained his revolver from the pocket of the coat he had been forced to discard a few moments before, and with this he covered Tompkins; and when the man at last looked up the weapon was levelled squarely between his eyes in a steady hand, and a steady and determined eye looked along the barrel.

"No foolishness," said Dick quietly. "You'll find that I have no compunction in pressing the trigger, as my friend had."

There was something in Dick's voice that told Tompkins the boy meant what he said.

He remained quiet.

"Now Ralph," said Dick, "We'll see how he likes his own medicine. Take my coat there and tie his legs."

He kept the man covered while Ralph followed his instructions.

"Now help him out of his coat, and bind his arms with it," continued Dick.

This, too, was the work of but a few moments, and at last Tompkins lay helpless.

"I guess this settles my first case," declared Dick, surveying the prostrate Tompkins, "and to tell the truth, I'm sorry, in a way. Now, Ralph, if you'll go down and phone Tom I'll stand guard until you get back. If Tom isn't home, phone police headquarters, explain the situation and have them send the patrol wagon and a couple of men. However, Tom should be home by now."

"Sure you are not afraid to stay with him alone?" demanded Ralph.

"Certain," was Dick's reply. "However, you might get back as quickly as possible."

Ralph nodded and left the room. Dick gave his undivided attention to his prisoner. Tompkins returned the lad's gaze with interest, but there was no conversation between the two.

Five minutes later Dick heard footsteps in the hall.

"By George! He didn't waste much time," he told himself.

He returned his revolver, which he still held in his hand, to his pocket.

And this proved his undoing.

The door opened and two men entered. They were strangers to Dick, but it was perfectly plain they were not strangers to Tompkins.

"Grab him, Henry!" cried Tompkins from the floor.

In spite of the fact that the newcomers must have been startled by the scene that met their eyes when they entered the room, they acted without an instant's hesitation.

Dick's hand flew to his pocket, as he leaped aside to avoid the first rush, and Tompkins cried out:

"Careful! He's got a gun!"

But before Dick could draw the weapon, the men had wheeled and were on him again. Realizing that he could not get the revolver out in time, Dick fired twice through his pocket, but the bullets went wild.

Dick's arm was seized in a powerful grasp and yanked from his pocket, the revolver flying from his hand as it was withdrawn. Dick struck at a face close to his own with his left fist and was stirred to renewed efforts by the fact that his fist found its mark.

But the struggle was of short duration. Dick fought gamely against heavy odds, but he was no match for either of his adversaries. He felt him-

self lifted from the floor and slammed down again and was conscious of a sharp pain in his head.

For a space he knew nothing more.

When Dick regained consciousness the first thing that caught his ears was the sound of low voices. He tried to sit up, but something held him back. Investigation showed that he had been tightly bound. He tried to move his hands and legs. These, too, he found he was unable to budge.

Dick raised his voice in a cry, but it was muffled in his throat. He became conscious for the first time of a stuffiness in his mouth. He had been gagged as well as bound.

Dick gave his attention to what those about him were saying.

"We'll have to hurry," said a voice that the lad recognized as belonging to Tompkins. "That other boy will be back here in a minute, and he may bring help."

"Then let's go," said a second voice. "But what will we do with our friend here," and Dick surmised correctly that he was the subject under discussion.

"Leave him," said the voice of the third man.

"I believe," said Tompkins, "that we had better take him along. He knows too much as it is. Besides, I have a score to settle with him."

"Suits me," said one of the others. "We've

a machine below. The quicker we get away from here the better."

"Let's be moving, then," said Tompkins. "Here, Henry, lend a hand and we'll carry this fellow downstairs. Don't bother with the elevator."

Dick felt a pair of hands take hold of his feet and another pair of his head, and then he was conscious of being carried into the hall, down the stairs and at last out into the air, where at length he was deposited in the rear seat of an automobile.

The other men climbed in, and directly the machine moved down the street.

CHAPTER VI.

RALPH TO THE RESCUE.

WHEN Ralph left Dick and Tompkins alone, he found it necessary to go several blocks to find a telephone. Consequently it was all of ten minutes before he was able to get Tom on the wire.

Tom wasted no time with foolish questions.

"You get back to Dick," he instructed. "I'll be there on the run."

Ralph replaced the receiver and left the store. He arrived at the apartment again just in time to

see a large automobile drive away. This, although Ralph did not know it then, was the machine in which Dick was a prisoner.

The elevator was several floors up when Ralph re-entered the building, so the lad did not wait for it to come down, but instead mounted the two flights four stairs at a time.

He hurried down the hall and flung open the door of the room he had so recently quitted—and started back aghast. Neither Dick nor Tompkins was there.

Ralph did not need to be told what had happened. He knew, as well as though he had been a witness of the struggle that had taken place in his absence, that Dick was in the hands of his enemies.

Ralph sank down in a chair. Then he rose again and hurried down stairs. The colored elevator boy was at the door. Ralph questioned him sharply, but could elicit no information. The boy professed absolute ignorance, and Ralph believed him.

"I guess there is nothing to do but wait for Tom," he told himself at last.

And so he waited, impatiently.

The wait was not long, however. Ten minutes later an automobile came dashing down the street, and pulled up in front of the apartment with a jerk. Ralph ran to the street and reached the side

of the car in time to take hold of Tom's arm as the latter alighted.

"Where's Dick?" were Tom's first words.

"Gone," replied Ralph. "I believe Tompkins has taken him away."

"But I thought you told me over the phone that you had the man tied up tightly?"

"We did. The only way that I can account for their disappearance is that Tompkins must have had help. I am sure he could not have loosened his bonds unaided."

"That's possible," Tom admitted. "We'll question the elevator boy."

"I've done that," said Ralph. "He doesn't know a thing."

"Sure?" asked Tom. "He may be lying."

"I don't think so," Ralph protested.

Nevertheless Tom was not satisfied, and insisted on an inquisition of the colored boy himself. But his efforts were no better than Ralph's had been, and at last he turned away disappointed.

"We're up against a blind trail," he told Ralph at last. "There is no telling which way they have gone."

"Perhaps we might find a clue in the room upstairs," said Ralph hopefully.

"Good idea, son," declared Tom. "You show symptoms of brains. Come on. We'll have a look."

Tom satisfied the colored boy with a view of his badge, although there was really no need for this, as his trooper's uniform was sufficient evidence of his identity.

Upstairs Tom turned a critical eye on the contents of the room.

"Looks like there had been quite a struggle," he said, indicating the overturned table and chairs.

"There was," replied Ralph dryly, "although I have no doubt there was a second struggle, after I left."

"No doubt," agreed Tom. "Well, I'll have a look at the contents of the desk over there. I see nothing else that will offer a tangible clue."

He tried the desk. It was locked. Tom drew his revolver and broke the desk open with a single blow. Then he plunged his hand into a mass of papers the open top revealed.

These he scanned rapidly, and at last he gave an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Find something?" asked Ralph.

"Yes, although it may amount to nothing. Here's a letter signed Tompkins addressed to a man named Henry, which mentions what may be a rendezvous across town. Of course it may not lead us anywhere, but it's worth looking up."

"What are you going to do?" demanded Ralph.

"First I'll finish looking through these papers, then I'm going to the address mentioned here."

"Can I go with you?"

"H-m-m," said Tom, looking at Ralph over the top of the letter he was reading. "Seems to me you have had excitement enough for one day. Why should I take you?"

"I might be able to help," declared Ralph.

Tom considered the matter a moment.

"So you might," he said at last. "I guess there are no objections. But we'll stop on the way and pick up a couple of policemen. We may need them."

Further examination of the papers in the desk revealed no additional clues, so presently Tom led the way to the automobile on the street below.

Five minutes later they were at police headquarters, where Tom picked up two officers in uniform—Patrolmen Murphy and Delehanty. Tom took the wheel again and the car continued its journey.

At Fourteenth and Market streets Tom drew up alongside the curb. He alighted and motioned the others out after him.

"We'll go the rest of the way afoot," he said. "It's almost midnight and everyone seems to be in bed. There is no use arousing the neighborhood."

He led the way along Fourteenth street, the others following closely.

He drew up before a house at last, and compared the number on the door with that in the letter.

"Guess this is the place," he said. "Now, you men stand alongside the house here out of sight. You, too, Ralph. I'll ring the bell and endeavor to get inside. If I'm not out in five minutes, break in after me. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," replied the patrolman, named Murphy.

Tom climbed the steps and rang the bell. A moment later the door was opened a trifle, and a woman's voice demanded:

"What do you want?"

"I want to see Tompkins," replied Tom, keeping well back so the light would not fall on his uniform. "He told me he'd be here at this time."

"There are some men here," the woman said, "but I don't know whether there is a Tompkins among them. If you'll wait a minute I'll find out."

She made as though to close the door.

But Tom was too quick for her. He thrust a foot in the door, pushed it open and brushed by the woman.

"I'll wait inside if you don't mind," he said quietly.

But in passing through the door Tom had exposed his uniform. The woman screamed.

"Here, none of that," exclaimed Tom gruffly.

"Be quiet, or I shall lock you up along with the others."

At the far end of the hall he heard a sudden commotion, and drawing his revolver he dashed in that direction.

Came the sound of a door hastily flung open and of hurried footsteps and gruff exclamations.

Tom reached the end of the hall and stepped into a now unoccupied room in time to see a form flitting through a door.—

"Halt!" he cried.

But the injunction was not obeyed, and the door was banged closed in his face. Tom threw his weight against it, but he had not been quick enough, for the last man to go through had succeeded in turning the key in the lock.

Tom muttered an imprecation. Quickly he placed the muzzle of his revolver against the lock and fired.

The door swung open and Tom dashed through.

He saw several forms flitting through the darkness of the yard beyond and heard the cough of an automobile.

His prey was about to escape.

Tom realized that the possibility of overtaking the fugitives before the machine could get under way was scarce. Quickly he noted that it was

headed toward Market street, and as quickly he mapped out his course of action.

Turning, he ran around the house to where Ralph and the two patrolmen still stood.

"Quick! Follow me!" he cried, and without waiting for an explanation he dashed toward Market street, where his own automobile was parked.

Even as he reached his car, the one bearing the fugitives careened into Market street and headed toward the center of the city.

Tom sprang to the wheel. Fortunately he had left the engine running, so the work of starting took but an instant. As Ralph and the two policemen swung aboard, he sent the machine around in a short circle so abruptly that it seemed the car would overturn. Then they were off after the fugitives.

In spite of the rocking of the automobile, Ralph climbed from the rear seat to Tom's side.

"Do you think they have Dick in there?" he demanded, pointing to the other car, now some distance ahead.

"I don't know," Tom shouted back. "But if they have we'll get him quick enough."

Ralph said nothing, but recalling the difficulties earlier in the evening, he was not quite so sure.

Straight down Market street the two cars raced, through the heart of the city and past the police

station, where they wheeled on to Front Street, and headed north along the River Road.

Here the first car increased its pace, and Tom found himself hard put to keep the fugitives in sight.

Mile after mile they sped through the darkness.

"At this rate, we'll be back in Pittsburgh before morning unless something breaks," Ralph told himself.

But in this the lad was wrong. For the chase was to come to an end long before the day broke.

CHAPTER VII.

DICK SHOWS HIS METTLE.

To Dick, after he was carried from the apartment where he had been overpowered by Tompkins and his friends, it seemed that he rode for an hour in the automobile before it drew up in what he took to be an alley, and the men with him alighted.

"Carry him in," said Tompkins' voice.

"Not much," declared another. "I'll cut the bonds on his legs, and he can walk or be dragged, according to how much sense he has."

Tompkins chuckled.

"A good idea," he replied.

Dick felt his captor fumbling with the bonds on his leg. Then the man stepped away.

"Get out," he ordered.

Dick did so.

"Now walk in front of me," was the command, and Dick did as commanded.

Fortunately the lad had not been blindfolded, so he could see what was going on.

With one of his captors behind him, he crossed a small yard, ascended a short flight of steps, and followed the figures ahead of him into a room on the first floor.

The last man followed, and directly there was light.

"Now," said Tompkins, "the first thing to do is to dispose of this fellow."

"Oh, there is no hurry," said the man addressed as Henry. "I'll tie him up again and lock him in the closet there," and he indicated a closet in the corner of the room.

"No need of tying him," declared Tompkins. "He'll be safe enough."

So Dick was locked in the dark closet.

So dark was it in the closet that the lad could not have seen his hand in front of him had his bonds permitted him to raise it before his face. But he could hear, and he decided to learn what

he could of his captors, should they be incautious enough to talk.

Dick heard chairs scrape over the floor, indicating that his captors were arranging themselves about a table. Then he heard the tinkle of glasses, which told him the men were drinking.

"Tompkins," said a voice which Dick recognized as belonging to the man called Henry, "how did you happen to get into this mess?"

"To tell the truth I don't know," said Tompkins with an imprecation; "but I'll tell you how it happened. I was walking along Mullberry street last night when the brother of this kid we have locked up nabbed me. He took me to his home nearby and was about to phone for the wagon when I jumped him. In the midst of it, this youngster interfered. Well, to make a long story short I got away and headed for Pittsburgh. I left the train at Altoona to avoid pursuit and fell into more trouble, but got away again.

"In the morning I went to Pittsburgh, thence to Connellsville and on to Greensburg, and doubled on my tracks. I thought I had thrown off all possible pursuit when I went to Henry's room tonight; but it appears that this young Hazelton had been on my trail all the time and that he had enlisted his chum in the chase. Well, we fought there and I got the worst of it. That's all."

"He seems to be rather a troublesome youngster," declared another voice.

"He's all of that, Smith," declared Tompkins. "That's why I say something must be done with him."

"We'll let that pass for the moment," said Smith. "The thing we all want to know is, where is the money?"

"The money," said Tompkins, "is in a safety deposit box in the Mechanics bank in Pittsburgh. The key is in my pocket. We can go there tomorrow and get it."

"That's all right, then," said Henry. "We'll leave it there, as agreed, until we have disposed of the other jobs."

"Right," agreed Smith. "And while we're on the subject, how about these other jobs?"

"No reason for changing the schedule," declared Tompkins. "You and Henry are to go through with the First National undertaking in McKeesport tomorrow night, and Allen, here, and myself will tackle the Merchants' and Miners' in Allentown the following night."

"That's all arranged, then," said the third man of the party, called Allen. "And we'll meet in my room in Pittsburgh one week from tonight and divide up."

"Correct," declared Tompkins. "Now what—quiet, men!"

He broke off suddenly as a bell rang in the hall.

"What's that?" demanded Henry.

"Doorbell," said Smith quietly. "Don't know who it can be, but we'd better be ready to move. Get that kid out of the closet and hustle him into the car. Tompkins and I'll wait and make sure."

All the foregoing conversation had been perfectly audible to Dick, in his closet prison. Now something told the lad that the man at the door was Tom and he determined to take advantage of the first opportunity to make a break for liberty.

But it appeared that the first opportunity would be a long time in presenting itself.

It was well for the four bank hobbers that they had acted the moment the doorbell rang. Otherwise Tom certainly would have overtaken them before they could have entered their automobile.

As it was, however, Dick found himself hurried into the machine between Allen and the man called Henry. The latter started the engine and the car was ready to go the moment Tompkins and Smith arrived, which they did a moment later.

"Quick, Henry!" cried Smith as he swung aboard on the heels of Tompkins.

Henry needed no urging, and the car started off

with a lurch. As it rounded on to Market street, Smith cried:

"There they are with a machine. Let her out, Henry."

Henry followed instructions to the letter.

Dick now recognized his surroundings. He knew that Tom would never relinquish pursuit of the bandits as long as there was a possibility of overtaking them, and he determined to lend a hand if it were humanly possible.

And at last his chance came.

As the car raced madly along the river road, the lad struggled with his bonds, until at last they slipped. It was the work of only a few moments to release his hands altogether and remove the gag from his mouth. Then the lad bided his time.

It came as the car was forced to slow down to round a sharp curve.

With a stealthy movement, so as not to arouse the suspicions of Smith who sat on his left in the rear seat, the lad slipped his hand into the man's pocket. What he sought was there.

Quietly he drew the revolver from Smith's pocket. Then, as the car rounded the curve and was about to speed forward again, he leaned forward and pressed the cold steel against Henry's neck.

"Slow down or I fire!" he cried.

At the same moment almost, Smith made a move as though to wrest the weapon from the lad's hand.

"Look out!" cried Dick. "If I fire we'll all be killed, and I give you my word I will fire if you interfere with me."

Smith drew back.

There seemed nothing for Henry, at the wheel, to do but obey Dick's command.

The car slowed down.

Dick got to his feet and stepped to the ground. Then, covering the others with the revolver, he ordered them, to alight.

For a moment it appeared that they would do so.

Meanwhile, around the curve flashed the pursuing car driven by Dick's brother. An exclamation of exultation leaped into the lad's throat, and in that moment he relaxed his vigilance.

In that moment he felt a heavy blow on his head, and toppled over in the road, as Henry sent the car forward with a lurch.

Tom saw the body of his fallen brother in the middle of the road by the glare of his searchlight. It was so close ahead that it was with difficulty that he brought the car to a stop without running over the unconscious form.

It took but a glance to tell Tom what had happened. Quickly he leaped to the road, gathered the form of his brother into his arms, and deposited

him in the rear seat with Ralph and the two policemen.

"Revive him if you can," he commanded. "I haven't time to stop now."

He reseated himself at the wheel and the car sped forward again.

The fugitives had gained some little distance before Tom resumed the chase, and the young officers realized that the task of overtaking them was, accordingly, that much harder.

"But I'm going to get 'em," he declared between his teeth.

Meanwhile, as the car sped along, Ralph bent his attention to his chum, and at last the lad sat up.

A few moments later, refreshed by the cool night breeze, he was himself again. As the car continued its mad race he gave an account of his experiences to Ralph. Then, for the first time, he noticed the presence of the two policemen in the car.

"And what are you men doing here?" he demanded.

"Trying to catch that car ahead," replied Murphy.

"But you're out of the city," protested Dick. "You will have no power to make an arrest."

"Maybe not," said Patrolman Delehanty, "but we'll help make it just the same, if we get a chance.

A blue coat is a bluecoat, you know, and they wear 'em in Pittsburgh as well as in Harrisburg."

"That's all right," Dick admitted, "but your badge of authority is a little bit different, you know."

"Well," replied Murphy, "I've hidden the word Harrisburg before. I guess I can do it again in a good cause, eh Delehanty?"

"You said something, Murph," was Delehanty's reply.

Dick gazed forward in the darkness.

"Seems to me we are gaining," he declared.

"We are," replied Ralph. "We'll get 'em—Hello."

He broke off suddenly, for the car ahead had come to a stop.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIGHT.

ABOVE the roar of the pursuing automobile as it rushed forward, Dick heard several sharp cracks. To some these sounds might have indicated bursting automobile tires, but every occupant of the moving machine knew them instantly for what they were.

The bandits ahead had opened fire.

Tom swung the car to the right hand side of the road, slowed down, and presently came to a stop. Even as it did so, the windshield was shattered into fragments as a bullet plowed through it.

Tom heard the bullet whine past his right ear.

"Out and take cover behind the car," he ordered, leaping to the ground and producing a revolver.

Dick, Ralph and the two policemen followed suit. Tom turned to Dick.

"You and Ralph had better keep out of this," he advised. "Somebody is liable to get hurt, and I'm answerable for the safety for both of you."

"I've still got my gun, Tom, and I can use it," protested Ralph.

"I haven't any, but I may be of use if we come to close quarters," declared Dick.

"You stand back of this car, both of you, and don't expose yourselves," said Tom firmly. "I'll handle those fellows, with the assistance of Murphy and Delehanty."

Dick mumbled something intelligible only to himself, but said nothing aloud.

Tom peered around one side of the automobile, and as he did so there was a spurt of flame ahead and a sharp report.

"They must have eyes like cats," mumbled Tom. "I can't see them."

"I can, sir, from this side," said Murphy.

Tom moved to the other side of the car.

"'Tis a bit better here," he agreed.

Again there were several flashes of flame ahead, and the boys could hear the singing of bullets as they swept by; but not one found its mark.

"This won't do," said Tom at last. "We've got to get closer quarters some way. Here Murphy, you sneak off in the trees on the right. I'll cover your advance. Delehanty, you do the same on the other side of the road."

The policemen wasted no time in argument. Delehanty cleared the road on the left with several quick leaps and disappeared. He attracted several shots as he did so, but Tom felt certain he had reached the shelter of the trees in safety.

Murphy, closer to the road, did not draw a shot as he disappeared in the darkness.

So far the pursuers had not fired a shot.

"Look here, Tom," said Dick, "if you would just let Ralph and me mix in this game it would be much simpler. Ralph has a gun. Now you give me one, and we'll reinforce Murphy and Delehanty and leave you to guard the front while we attack on the flanks. When they find out they're surrounded, they may surrender."

"Too much risk, youngster," declared Tom.

"I don't see why, Tom," protested Ralph. "Seems to me it would be much simpler all around."

"It might be," Tom admitted, "but I don't like to expose you boys."

"Can't see why you should kick if we don't mind it," declared Dick.

"What would father say?" demanded Tom.

"Well, he's not here," was Dick's stock reply, "and I don't tell everything I know."

Tom smiled in the darkness.

"Have it your own way," he said at last. "Dick, you follow Delehanty, and Ralph, you can trail along after Murphy. When I open fire, Dick, you jump across the road. Here's a gun for you."

A moment later Tom, peering around the car, opened fire with his automatic. At the same time Dick darted across the road. He reached the shelter of the trees without so much as hearing a bullet pass near him. Then he moved forward in the direction Delehanty had so recently gone.

Ralph was equally fortunate in reaching shelter safely, and a few moments later he had overtaken Murphy, who greeted him with only a word.

Dick, on the other hand, found that Delehanty had advanced more swiftly than had Murphy, and the policeman was already close to the bandits when Dick came up with him.

Meanwhile, Tom, from his post of vantage, was keeping up a stream of fire. It was not his pur-

pose to shoot down any of his opponents under this fusillade, but rather to keep them occupied until his friends could find strategic positions on either side of the road, thus out-flanking the enemy.

Directly opposite the automobile of the bandits, and their presence still undiscovered, Dick spoke to Delehanty.

"Let's give them a chance to surrender," he said.

"What's the use?" Delehanty wanted to know.

"They won't do it."

"You never can tell," Dick replied. "We should give them the chance, at all events."

"Maybe so," said Delehanty. He raised his voice in a shout. "Surrender, you fellows," he called. "We have you surrounded. You can't escape."

His only answer was a volley of revolver shots, which swept close to where he and Dick stood.

"You see," said Delehanty significantly.

"I see," replied Dick. "Well, let's close in on them. Murphy and Ralph should be near on the other side of the road. If we can keep them busy it will give Tom a chance to advance."

"Come on," said Delehanty.

They advanced to the edge of the road, and still under cover, levelled their weapons.

Again Delehanty raised his voice and demanded the surrender of the bandits, and again the answer was a volley.

Dick, taking careful aim at a man who seemed

to be tinkering with the engine of the automobile, pressed the trigger.

His shot was rewarded with a howl of pain, and the target of the lad's weapon leaped from his position behind the car.

"First blood to us," said Dick quietly.

The bandits were firing regularly now, and Dick felt the wind of bullets as they passed uncomfortably close to his head.

Meanwhile, Ralph and Murphy had opened fire from the opposite side of the road, and Dick could see Tom advancing in the open.

"We've got 'em if they'll just stay and fight it out," the lad told himself.

But what he feared came to pass.

Apparently the trouble with the bandits' engine had been remedied. One of the men gave a shout and jumped into the car. The others did the same—all but one.

This man proved to be the one called Henry. As he was about to leap into the car, Delehanty dropped him with a single well-directed shot. One of the others stooped as though to pick him up but was stopped by a voice that Dick recognized as that of Tompkins.

"Never mind him," Tompkins cried. "Quick! Jump in. Every man for himself."

The other figure did as instructed.

Now Dick and Delehanty threw all caution to

the winds, and dashed forward in an effort to intercept the fugitives before the machine could be started.

From the other side of the road Murphy and Ralph also appeared. Tom, approaching up the road, was firing at the tires of the machine.

But, unharmed in spite of the fusillade of shots, the automobile dashed forward with a lurch.

Tom ran up with a cry of anger.

"Pick this fellow up and bring him to our car," he ordered. "We'll take up the chase again."

Dick took the man by his feet and Delehanty by his head and carried him toward the waiting automobile. Tom and the others preceded them, and the former had the engine going by the time they arrived.

"I doubt if we overtake them again," Tom muttered to Dick, who took his seat beside his brother. "That was some pretty rotten shooting we all did, if you ask me."

"It certainly was," declared Dick; "but we have one of them at all events."

"We should have them all," declared Tom. "I was in hopes of ending this case tonight."

"Accidents can't be helped," said Dick sententiously.

"Maybe not," Tom agreed, "but the way this fellow Tompkins keeps getting away from me seems to be more than an accident. It's getting more like

a habit. But tell me, what did they do to you, Dick?"

"Well, they didn't hurt me any; but I've overheard enough to send them all to prison for life."

"Explain."

Dick did so, and at the conclusion of his story, Tom gave a long whistle.

"We seem to have struck a nest of bank robbers, all right," he said "and it wouldn't surprise me if there were more than four men in the gang. So they are going to try a few more robberies, eh?"

"I doubt if they will now" said Dick. "They must know that I overheard their conversation, and that we will be on the lookout for them."

"That's true, too," Tom admitted, "but at the same time, there is always the possibility that they will take a chance. If they get away from us now, we'll have the banks carefully guarded at any rate."

"They seem to have got away," said Dick, gazing along the blank road ahead.

"So they do, but hold on. Isn't that a car in the road ahead?"

Dick peered intently into the darkness.

"It certainly is," he exclaimed at last. "I caught the glow of the searchlight as they rounded a curve there. They haven't given us the slip yet."

"Well," said Tom "I'm a little skittish about

driving too fast along a dark road, but here goes. I'm going to 'step on her.' "

The car dashed forward faster than before.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CHASE PROVES FUTILE.

It was dangerous, this riding along a dark road at a speed of sixty miles and more an hour, and nobody realized it better perhaps than Tom Hazelton himself. In the rear of the car, Ralph Harkness and the two policemen were jostled from side to side, their heads occasionally coming in contact with the top of the car when the machine encountered a rough place in the road.

"I say, Tom, don't you think you're going a little too fast?" demanded Dick, at length.

"We've got to go fast," was Tom's reply. "We don't seem to be gaining, and if the fellows in front can hit up sixty miles an hour, so can we."

Dick subsided, and for the space of ten minutes said nothing.

From time to time the machine flashed through little towns, as Dick could tell by lights in a few windows. But for the most part the chase led along a lonely road.

Some miles east of Altoona, Tom suddenly threw on the brakes, and the car came almost to a stop.

"What's the matter?" demanded Dick.

"Thought I heard an engine whistle," replied Tom, listening intently. "I don't know whether there is a railroad crossing ahead or not; but it's just as well to be on the safe side."

Directly the others heard the same sound, as the locomotive whistle gave two long toots followed by two short ones.

"Whistling for a crossing, at all events," said Dick.

"We'll go ahead slowly," said Tom.

A moment later the machine turned a sharp curve, and Dick made out a sight that sent his heart into his throat.

Far down the road he could dimly see the glow of the searchlight ahead of the automobile they were pursuing. To the right the fiery eye of the locomotive was moving swiftly toward the route of the automobile.

"They're goners!" Dick shouted.

He stood up in the car, as did the others with the exception of Tom, who maintained his clutch on the wheel and kept his eyes glued to the road ahead.

"The fools, Why don't they slow down!" exclaimed Ralph.

"Wait! They'll make it yet," declared Policeman Murphy.

"No they won't," said Dick. "See! The car is slowing down."

It was true. Apparently realizing at last that it would be impossible to beat the train to the crossing, the man at the wheel of the bandit car was making strenuous efforts to bring the machine to a stop.

But, as it was perfectly plain to those in the pursuing car, he had delayed too long.

Instinctively Dick shut his eyes as the engine and the automobile seemed to leap together. Then he heard a shrill blast from the locomotive and the grinding of brakes. He heard, however, no sound of a crash. Then he opened his eyes, and as he did so he felt the automobile dash forward.

"Did they hit?" he demanded of Tom.

"Yes," said Tom. "Our chase has probably ended. If all the occupants of that machine weren't killed I miss my guess."

"Guess we'll have a hunt for the bodies then," said Dick. "The train has almost stopped."

"We'll lend a hand at any rate," said Tom.

Two hundred yards beyond the crossing the engineer had brought the train to a stop. Now, as Tom and the others left the automobile, they could see figures of the engine and the train crew hurrying back along the track.

For some reason that he could not explain, Dick struck a match and looked at his watch. It was 3.45 o'clock. In an hour it would be daylight.

The highway at the point where the collision occurred was along a sloping embankment. On either side narrow valleys could be dimly seen in the darkness.

Tom and his party reached the railroad crossing before members of the train crew, and were surveying the scene as well as possible in the darkness when the latter hurried up.

"Were you fellows in that car?" demanded the engineer, striding up to Tom.

"Luckily we were not," Tom replied.

The engineer looked at Tom's uniform, and then sized up Policeman Murphy and Delehanty who stood beside him.

"Officers, eh?" he said.

"Right," said Tom. "We were chasing those fellows. Apparently they tried to get across the track ahead of you, thinking to distance us. From where we were it looked as though the machine must have been squarely on the track when struck."

"Not quite," said the engineer. "They almost cleared the track. I must have caught them on the rear wheel. We'll probably find the machine at the foot of the embankment."

"We may as well look then," said Tom.

He led the way down the embankment on the

right hand side of the railroad tracks, the engine crew and members of his own party trailing after him.

The train, Dick learned upon questioning the fireman, was a fast express from Pittsburgh for New York. The fireman had sighted the approaching automobile on his side of the cab when it was only a few yards from the crossing. He had shouted a warning to the engineer, and the latter had closed the throttle and applied the brakes instantly, but too late.

By this time passengers in the night coaches, aware that something had gone wrong, began to stream from the cars and ply members of the train crew with questions. They followed the searching party down the embankment.

Dick, at Tom's side, was first to spy the outline of the wrecked automobile, some distance away and farther to the right.

"There it is," he cried, and quickened his steps.

"Funny we haven't come across any bodies," said Dick. "It's hardly possible they all stayed with the machine as it rolled down hill. However, queer things do happen, and they must all be under the overturned car."

"They must all be dead," declared Ralph, "or at least unconscious. If they were alive and pinned under there they'd be calling for help."

"It does seem that way," Dick agreed.

The party had now come to the car, which was lying with wheels in the air, with pieces of wreckage strewn near by.

"Lend a hand, men, and we'll see who's under here," said Tom.

This was done willingly, and a few moments later the wreckage had been cleared away. Only a single prostrate form was exposed to the gaze of the searchers. Tom, with Dick at his side, bent over the man. Then he raised himself up.

"I don't know him, do you Dick?" he asked.

Dick scanned the man's face closely.

"It's the man they called Smith," he said.

"Well, he's dead. There is no doubt about that," declared Tom. "However, it would be well to have a physician look at him."

He turned to the crowd of passengers who had followed them to the scene.

"Is there a physician present?" he demanded.

A man stepped forward.

"I'm a doctor," he said quietly.

"Then have a look at this man, will you?" said Tom.

The physician bent over the body of Smith.

"Dead," he said a moment later. "Skull fractured and neck broken, besides other bones. Death was instantaneous."

Dick turned to Murphy.

"You and Delehanty carry him back to the ma-

chine," he instructed. "We'll have a look for the others."

For an hour the search was continued. Passengers and train crew alike searched every inch of the ground for a radius of many hundred yards, but no trace of the other occupants of the ill-fated car could be found.

"Strange," muttered Tom. "They must have been in the machine when it was hit."

"Sure about that, Tom?" asked Dick. "Smith, as the position of his body would indicate, was doing the driving. He stuck to the wheel to the last. What was to prevent the others leaping from the machine just before it reached the tracks? Remember, it slowed down?"

"By Jove! That hadn't occurred to me," declared Tom. "It must be as you suggest, Dick, for had they been in the machine they undoubtedly would have been killed, and their bodies would have been nearby. We'll have a look on the other side of the tracks. They may be lying there, injured."

"And they may have got up and disappeared," Dick replied.

"That's possible, too," Tom admitted.

Dick led the way back to the point from which the search had started, and from there, the searchers started off in the other direction.

Dick, together with Tom and Ralph, examined

closely the road for some distance back from the track.

"Here's where they started to slow down," said Tom at last. "You can see how the tires cut up the road."

"Right," agreed Dick. "Then it is about here that they jumped."

"Look, Tom," cried Ralph suddenly.

He pointed to a tree some distance back from the road. On it was a piece of cloth.

"Jove!" said Tom. "This is where they jumped alright. Whoever left that piece of his coat there must have hit that tree pretty hard."

For the better part of an hour the search continued, but it was without result.

"Well, there is no need looking further," said Tom at length. "If they were able to walk after jumping out of that car they are safe enough now. We'll endeavor to pick up the trail from some other place. Besides, two of the bandits are accounted for. One dead, and the other safely in our car. I'm going to stay here on the scene the rest of the night, Dick. You and Ralph board the train and go to Harrisburg, Murphy and Delehanty can take the car and the prisoner back."

Dick protested that he and Ralph should stay, but this time his protest was unavailing. Tom was adamant.

And so, after some further delay, Dick and Ralph found themselves in a night coach aboard the express, bound again for Harrisburg, and directly the train moved off.

"Tough," was Ralph's comment. "I would like to have stayed—Great Scott, Dick! Look there!"

Dick looked in the direction Ralph pointed, and almost jumped out of his seat. For, several seats ahead sat a figure hunched in his seat, cap almost covering his face. It was Tompkins.

CHAPTER X.

THE FIRST VICTORY.

"Now what do you think of that?" Dick fairly gasped as he sank back into his seat. "Do you think we can be mistaken?"

"Hardly," was Ralph's grim reply. "We've followed that chap too long not to know him when we see him."

"Right," agreed Dick. "But how did he get here?"

"Simple enough. After jumping from the machine, he laid low until the search had started on the opposite side of the railroad tracks. Then he

got up and mingled with the passengers. He was safe enough, as none of them knew who he was."

"That's all right," Dick admitted, "but the conductor should know there is something wrong about him now, as he has no ticket."

"I don't think so. You see the tickets are all taken up when the train leaves Pittsburgh, and each passenger is given a slip showing his destination. Checks for Harrisburg were probably collected as soon as this train left Altoona, so that none of the Harrisburg passengers now have checks. That makes Tompkins perfectly safe, and he knows it."

"That must be the answer," Dick assented after a moment's thought. "Do you suppose the other bandit is aboard?"

"It's possible, although it doesn't necessarily follow. It looks like it was every man for himself when the chase grew hot. The other man may have gone in the other direction."

"What do you think we had better do now?"

"We might notify the conductor."

Dick shook his head. "The conductor wouldn't have any authority to hold him," he declared with a good deal of emphasis. "The conductor doesn't even know that the man is a fugitive, and he would probably think a long time before taking our word. He doesn't know us."

"He ought to," insisted Ralph. "He saw us with

Tom and the other officers, and heard Tom send us home."

"I know that; but that is no reason why he should take our word about Tompkins. My advice is to wait until we reach Harrisburg and nab him ourselves.

"We did that once before," said Ralph with a shrug of his shoulders, "and see what happened."

"Then it's up to us to see that the same thing doesn't happen again."

"You surely said something," was Ralph's emphatic rejoinder. "We'll see to it that he doesn't elude us this time."

Dick endorsed the statement with a nod of his head quite as emphatic as Ralph's words and the discussion ceased for the time, as both lads threw themselves back in their seats, their faces well covered by their caps, and kept a watchful eye upon the fugitive.

It was now daylight and both the boys were sleepy, Dick particularly so, as he had been longer on the trail; but they made a manful effort and kept awake, ready to act whenever the time was ripe.

It was almost 6 o'clock when the conductor called "Harrisburg."

Tompkins got to his feet and moved toward the door. Dick and Ralph followed him at some distance.

"We'll see where he goes," whispered Dick, and Ralph nodded his understanding.

For a second they followed Tompkins through the station and up Market street. But this time the chase was not so long.

Tompkins turned in a hotel on the corner of Fourth and Market, and the lads saw him approach the desk and register. Then, escorted by a bell-boy, he entered the elevator.

Dick breathed a sigh of relief.

"We've got him this time," he confided to Ralph.

"That so?" said Ralph. "How do you mean?"

"Why, it's plain enough. He's dead sure he's safe, or he wouldn't have come here; also he's worn out, and the chances are he is suffering from some injury. He's so dead tired he probably will sleep for eight hours, and we know right where he is. That should be enough."

"All right if you say so," said Ralph, "but what do you figure on doing? Going in after him?"

"Not this time," replied Dick with a smile. "He might give us the slip again. First we'll see under what name he has registered. Then we'll go to police headquarters and get some help."

"Good," said Ralph. "Now, let's have a look at his name."

The boy entered the hotel and approached the desk. While Ralph engaged the clerk in conversation, Dick scanned the register. The last name

on the page was William Watson. This, Dick knew must be Tompkins, for no other man had registered since the lads had seen Tompkins sign the book.

It was only a few minutes' walk to police headquarters, where Dick demanded to see Chief of Police Holbrook. He had no trouble in securing a hearing, for he was well known as Tom Hazelton's brother.

Chief Holbrook listened to Dick's story in amazement.

"So that's where Murphy and Delehanty went?" he said, when the lad had concluded." According to your account of things they should be back by this time. They could cover the distance almost as quickly as a train."

The chief was surely a good reckoner, for even as he spoke the door of the office opened and Murphy and Delehanty strode in. They greeted the boys heartily and briefly confirmed the story they had told of the chase. They likewise officially reported the capture of one of the bandits and the death of another.

"Very good, men," said the chief after they had finished. "Now, if you will summon Clancy and Jones, I have a little piece of work I'd like you to do before you turn in for a much-needed rest."

Murphy stepped to the door, and in response to his

call two other policemen entered. Chief Holbrook addressed Murphy and Delehanty.

"You've had a lively chase," he said, "and it was only partly successful—two quarters so, I might say. Now if you will follow our young friends, I believe you'll be able to round up another quarter."

Murphy and Delehanty looked at Dick and Ralph in surprise.

"But—" began Murphy.

"I know what you'd say, Murph," laughed the chief; but the fact is that this man Tompkins you have been trying so hard to get, double-crossed you at the scene of the wreck, and returned on the same train with these boys."

"And where is he now, sir?" demanded Delehanty.

"That's what these boys will show you," said the chief. "I've only one word for you, and that is, bring this man Tompkins to me dead or alive within the hour."

"We'll do it, sir," declared Murphy.

Without further words Dick led the way from headquarters to the hotel where, after another glance at the register, the officers demanded to be shown to room 605.

"Top floor, eh?" commented Murphy. "Then he's safe enough. He won't jump out the window, I guess."

The two lads and the four policemen crowded into the little elevator and ascended to the sixth floor. The bell boy escorted them to room 605 and Dick rapped on the door.

There was no answer to the first knock, so Dick rapped again. Those outside heard sounds of a man leaving a bed, and footsteps on the floor.

"Who's there?" came a voice sleepily.

Dick wasted no time in subterfuge.

"The police!" he replied sharply. "We want you, Tompkins. Open the door."

Dick, with his ear to the door, heard Tompkins mutter an imprecation; but instead of opening the door the lad heard footsteps crossing the floor.

"Open the door!" cried Dick again.

Tompkins approached the door and spoke.

"I warn you to get away from that door," he said in a loud voice. "I'm a desperate man and I won't be taken alive."

"Don't be a fool, man," interposed Murphy at this juncture. "We're six to one against you. Open the door and come out peacefully, or we'll have to come after you."

"Come after me, then," said Tompkins harshly. "But I warn you I'll shoot the first man to set foot in this room."

"No use talking, Murph, said Delehanty. "Put your shoulder to the door."

"I've a better way than that," said Murphy.

He placed the muzzle of his revolver against the lock and fired. Then he stepped back quickly as the door swung loose,—and it was well that he did so, for there was a flash from within, and a bullet sped through the door.

“He’s trying to keep his word,” declared Murphy. “We’ll have to rush him men, and one of us may get hurt. You boys, there, stand back. I don’t want to have Tom Hazelton on my back.”

This time Dick and Ralph followed instructions without argument, and the four officers prepared for the rush.

“Ready?” asked Murphy, who had appointed himself leader of the party.

“All right, Murph,” said the others.

“Then let’s go.”

Murphy led the rush himself. The door was flung back under his powerful rush and a moment later he was in the room, revolver ready.

From one side of the room came a second flash of fire, and Murphy staggered back, his revolver falling to the floor. Two more cracks followed in quick succession, and Murphy toppled in a heap.

But in thus confining his attention to Murphy, Tompkins has exposed himself to the fire of Delehanty, the second man to enter the room.

Delehanty fired twice quickly. There was a cry of pain from Tompkins, and the man crumpled up on the floor.

"And that settles you," Dick heard Delehanty's voice say.

Unmindful of any further danger, Dick and Ralph rushed into the room. There they took in what had happened with a single glance. Dick leaped to Tompkins' side. The other officers in the meantime were bending over Murphy.

"He'll live," said Delehanty, "Thank God."

"And so will Tompkins," said Dick rising to his feet.

"I didn't shoot to kill," said Delehanty. "That man will live to hang, or I miss my guess. Call the ambulance, Clancy."

Clancy stepped to the phone.

"And thanks for your assistance," said Delehanty. "Come and see me tomorrow."

"Well, Delehanty," said Dick, "I guess there is nothing more Ralph and I can do, so with your permission, we'll leave you with your prisoner."

Without further words, Dick and Ralph left the room.

"And now," said Dick, "for home and a good sleep. I sure need it."

"Same here," said Ralph, "and not only that, but I believe we're entitled to it."

And to this Dick agreed.

CHAPTER XI.

A FRESH TRAIL.

"COME on, Dick; get up out of there."

The voice was Tom's. Dick sat up in bed.

"Hello! When did you get back?" he demanded.

"Just got here," was Tom's reply. "Stopped at headquarters when I reached Harrisburg and was told where I'd probably find you. You'll have to go to headquarters with me now. Chief wants to talk to you before formally turning Tompkins over to me."

"All right," said Dick. "I'll be with you in a jiffy." He turned and gave Ralph, who lay beside him and had not been aroused by the conversation, a nudge in the ribs.

"Come, Ralph, time to get up."

Ralph opened his eyes sleepily and sat up.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"Not much," replied Dick. "Just a little work to do. Roll out, now."

Ralph followed his chum to the floor and the two boys dressed rapidly. Then they accompanied Tom from the house.

Fifteen minutes later found them again in police headquarters and closeted with the chief. The

latter asked several questions having to do with the chase after Tompkins, but the interview was brief and the matter of turning the prisoner over to Tom was transacted with dispatch.

"Do you want him now, Tom?" the chief asked.

"No," replied Tom. "I'm going to catch the next train to Lancaster to report to Captain Mahon. I'll stop for him on the way back and take him to Johnstown."

"He's ready for you any time you want him," said the chief.

Tom left the room with his two companions.

"Now, youngster," he said, when they were on the street, "if you and Ralph want to go to Lancaster with me I will interpose no objections. I'd like to introduce you to Captain Mahon."

"Hurrray!" cried Ralph. "Of course we want to go. Don't we, Dick?"

"We certainly do," Dick agreed. "How soon can we get a train, Tom?"

"Half an hour, which will put us in Lancaster at 5 o'clock. I may stay in Lancaster all night, but you two boys can return later in the evening if you wish."

"Why not stay until you return, Tom?" asked Dick.

"Suit yourselves."

"Then we'll stay," Ralph decided.

And so it was arranged.

It is only a short run from Harrisburg to Lancaster on the fast express trains, so it was not yet half past five when the three left the train there.

"Straight to troop headquarters for us," said Dick, and led the way.

Dick had been in Lancaster often before, but as he had never met his brother's troop commander, he now followed Tom with considerable eagerness. So, for that matter, did Ralph.

Captain Mahon was in his office when Tom and his young companions entered. He greeted Tom with a smile.

"Well, Hazelton," he said, "I trust you are here to report success?"

"Partial success, sir," replied Tom. "The man I went after is in jail in Harrisburg with a wounded companion whom I have reason to believe was implicated in the robbery. However, I have not the proof, so I shall leave him there. I intend taking Tompkins to Johnstown tomorrow."

"I should say that your quest had been fully successful," declared Captain Mahon.

"That's because you haven't heard all the details, sir," was Tom's smiling rejoinder.

"Proceed," said his captain.

"Well, sir," Tom continued, "a third member of this bandit gang was killed in a wreck as we pursued him."

"Even better," commented Captain Mahon.

"But the fourth man," said Tom, "escaped."

Captain Mahon's eyebrows drew together in a frown.

"Bad," he said. "Explain, Hazelton."

Thus urged, Tom explained the whole case from the time he had encountered Tompkins before Dick and Ralph were drawn into the case. He extolled the action of both lads highly, and when he had concluded his recital, Captain Mahon sprang to his feet and extended a hand to each lad in turn.

"That was good work, young men," he declared. "The troop will be glad to thank you, through me, for your services. You have shown great courage and resourcefulness."

Both lads were considerably confused by this high praise, and their faces flushed. Captain Mahon smiled.

"Modest, too, eh?" he chuckled. "You'll get over that by the time you are as old as Hazelton here." He turned to Tom again. "Is it your opinion, Hazelton," he asked, "that there is a possibility of this McKeesport bank robbery being attempted tomorrow night in spite of what has happened?"

"It hardly seems probable, sir," Tom replied, "but there is always the possibility that it may. Besides, I am convinced that we have rounded up only a small part of an organized band of bank

robbers. I believe it would be well to be on the safe side."

"I've no doubt you're right," said Captain Mahon, after a slight pause, in which he seemed to be considering the matter. "In that event we will be prepared. Now that you're on this case, Hazelton, you might as well stay. I will let you pick half a dozen men and go to McKeesport tonight so that you may be on hand if anything happens."

"Very well, sir," said Tom, "but how about Tompkins?"

"I'll send Reynolds to take him back to Johnstown. Your troubles with Tompkins are over."

"Very well, sir."

"By the way," said Captain Mahon, "it strikes me that your brother and his chum here are entitled to something in the way of a reward."

"We didn't do anything to get a reward for, sir," declared Dick.

"Nevertheless, I feel that you are entitled to one," said Captain Mahon. "Come now, tell me what you would like, and if your wish is humanly possible, I will do my best to see that it is granted."

Ralph's heart leaped.

"Anything, sir?" he queried excitedly.

"I said anything within reason," replied Captain Mahon.

"Then," said Ralph, "for my part, I would like

to go with Tom to McKeesport and see the finish of the bandits, if they try to rob the bank."

At this Tom stepped forward with an ejaculation.

"But—" he began.

Captain Mahon held up a hand for silence. Then he turned to Dick.

"How about you, my lad?" he asked. "What is your wish in this matter?"

"To go with Tom," declared Dick stoutly.

Captain Mahon turned to Tom.

"You see, Hazelton?" he exclaimed.

"But think of the danger, captain," Tom protested.

"Pooh!" exclaimed the captain. "There is not one chance in a hundred that the robbery will be attempted. Besides, these lads have been through just as exciting events the last few hours and have come out whole. There is no cause to think they will come to grief now."

"But—" Tom began again.

"Besides," Captain Mahon continued, "I have promised to grant them their wish if it is in reason, and I am convinced that a trip to McKeesport is within reason. Come now, Hazelton, will you permit them to go with you, or must they go separately?"

"They can go with me, of course, sir, if they

must go," replied Tom; "but to be perfectly frank, I'd rather they wouldn't."

"But I've said they shall," decided Captain Mahon," and that settles it. Their transportation, of course, I shall see to myself. Now, Hazelton, you go pick your men while I have some further words with these Young State Troopers here."

Tom saluted and took his departure, while the lads swelled with pride at what Captain Mahon had called them.

"Young State Troopers." It was something to be proud of, in the minds of both Dick and Ralph.

"I just wanted to thank you again," said Captain Mahon. "You have been of invaluable service to my troop and I shall make it my business to see that all members of the troop hear about it. If I can ever be of service to you, do not hesitate to call on me."

"Thank you, sir," said Dick and Ralph, almost in a single voice.

Captain Mahon engaged the lads in further conversation, until Tom returned half an hour later, followed by six other members of the troop. These he introduced to Dick and Ralph as Troopers Griggs, Benton, Holliday, Jackson, Bowers and Saylor.

"I suppose," said Captain Mahon, "you will catch the next train for Pittsburgh?"

"We surely will," was Tom's prompt reply. "It's

most too far," he added with a smile, "to go on horseback."

"Or even on motorcycles," laughed Captain Mahon. "They'll have to stop calling us 'troopers' pretty soon, if we continue the use of trains and automobiles like you have been doing the last few days."

"That's true, Captain; but horses are mighty little use to a state constable these days. I expect it will be only a few years when we shall all be regularly mounted on motorcycles, just as the United States cavalry.

"But about this McKeesport trip. If we start immediately, we shall get to Pittsburgh a little after midnight. We'll stay there until the seven o'clock train out on the B. & O., which will get us into McKeesport half an hour later. That will give me the day to get the lay of the land. If the robbery comes off on schedule time, we shall be ready for it."

"Very well," said the troop commander. "If you will take my advice, you will visit the bank officials first thing in the morning and tip them off on what to expect."

"I shall do so, sir."

"It might be well to post a couple of men in the vaults," said Captain Mahon.

"I shall take whatever precautions I can, sir," declared Tom.

"Very well! Then there is no need my keeping you longer. Goodbye and good luck to you. And by the way, see that my young friends here are well taken care of."

"I'll keep them out of harm's way, sir," declared Tom grimly.

"No, no! I didn't mean that," Captain Mahon hastened to add. "Give them a chance to see what is going on. Don't forbid them to be out after dark. Times have changed since you were a boy, remember."

"They haven't changed much, sir," replied Tom with a laugh. "It was only two or three years ago that I would have been classed as a boy myself. I'm pretty young yet, captain."

"Maybe so. Maybe so," said Captain Mahon.

"Well, I won't retain you longer. Report at your earliest convenience. That's all."

CHAPTER XII.

MC KEESPORT.

McKEESPORT, a city of something less than 45,000 population at the time this story is written, lies fifteen miles east of Pittsburgh on the main line of the Baltimore and Ohio railroad. It is in

the center of the steel industrial region and boasts some of the largest steel plants in the United States.

It was toward this city that Dick, Ralph, Dick's brother Tom and the six state troopers were headed one morning in the early part of July.

In accordance with Tom's plans, they had spent the night in Pittsburgh. After breakfasting in the hotel near the Pennsylvania station, they caught a car across town to the Baltimore and Ohio depot, where they boarded the first eastbound train.

It was shortly before nine o'clock when they alighted in McKeesport.

It was no uncommon sight in McKeesport for half a dozen or more unmounted state troopers to be on the street, so Tom was not fearful of arousing the suspicion of the bank bandits should they be in the city. Nevertheless, he deemed it advisable to keep his men out of sight as much as possible. Accordingly, he led them to a hotel just across the street from the depot and had rooms assigned them. Tom took a room with Dick and Ralph.

"Now," he said, after the bellboy had left them alone, "I am going to the bank and interview the president or some of the other officials. I can take one of you with me, not both. Which of you wants to go."

"I do," said Dick.

"I do," declared Ralph.

Tom smiled.

"I said one of you," he replied.

"Tell you what, Dick, said Ralph, "I'll flip a coin. If you call it you go. If you don't I go."

"Suits me," said Dick. "Flip the coin."

Ralph produced a quarter, which he spun in the air, catching it as it came down and covering it with his other hand.

"Heads," said Dick.

The lads bent over the coin.

"Tails," said Ralph. "You lose."

"That's tough," said Dick, with a grin, "but I guess I can stand it."

"You'd better wait here until we return," said Tom, as with Ralph at his heels he passed out the door.

Dick sat down and picked up a paper.

"I'll read till you get back," he called after the others.

The First National Bank was a block away, on Fifth avenue, in the very heart of the business section of the city.

"You'd imagine a gang of bandits would think twice before trying to break into a place like this," was Ralph's comment as they entered the building.

Tom shrugged his shoulders.

"They're desperate men," he replied. "Most of them would stop at nothing."

He approached the cashier's cage and asked to be directed to the office of the president.

"Straight back," said the man in the cage, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

Tom led the way to the door of a room labeled "President Wheeler, private," where they were halted by an office boy.

The boy disappeared into the private office, but was back in a couple of minutes.

"Mr. Wheeler will see you at once," he announced. "This way, please."

Tom and the boy followed their escort into the private office, where they were cordially greeted by a fine-looking man with iron-gray hair and moustache, who shook hands with Tom and then with the boy, whom Tom introduced humorously as his body-guard.

"And to what am I indebted for this early morning visit?" enquired the bank president with an expression of mingled humor and surprise.

"Some rather unpleasant information, Mr. Wheeler," said Tom. "We have accidentally discovered that there is a plan on foot to rob your bank to-night, by the same law-breakers who robbed the Johnstown bank."

"What!" exclaimed President Wheeler, starting to his feet. "You don't mean it?"

"Unfortunately I do!" was Tom's emphatic reply. "I am here to prevent it if possible."

"Kindly explain," said the banker as he resumed his seat.

Tom did so. At the conclusion of the story, President Wheeler drew a breath of relief as he remarked: "It looks serious, although there is no certainty that the robbery will be attempted."

"My thought, exactly," agreed Tom. "If the men we have captured, or killed were the ring leaders, the plan will be abandoned; otherwise not. Therefore, we should take all precautions."

"I not only agree with you," said the banker, "but I am most anxious to assist in any way you suggest."

"That being the case, I shall station three of my men in the bank tonight. I and the other men will remain outside on the street. Personally, I hope the attempt will be made, as I am most anxious to round up all the bandits. If I may count upon you then, I shall have my men report to you singly after 3 o'clock this afternoon."

"You may count upon me to the limit," declared President Wheeler. "Of course the presence of your men will cause some comment among the employes of the bank, but I can promise that there will be no outside talk."

"That is well," said Tom. "Now, if it is not too much trouble, will you walk through the bank with me and show me the location of the vaults?"

"Of course," and President Wheeler led the way.

The inspection lasted perhaps half an hour, then Tom and Ralph returned to the president's private office.

"I should say the vaults would require the attention of a master craftsman," was Tom's comment. "I can't say that I have ever seen stronger. You have time-locks, of course?"

"Yes; set for 9 o'clock each morning."

"Well, I guess there is nothing further, Mr. Wheeler," said Tom. "You may expect the first of my men soon after three. I have your assurance that they will be given the run of the bank?"

"You have. Of course, it will be necessary to take my night watchman into your confidence. His name is Gridley."

"I'll leave that to you, sir."

"Very well. I must say that I believe your fears are groundless; but at the same time I agree with you that it is best to be prepared. Goodbye."

They shook hands, and Tom and Ralph took their departure.

Dick was still absorbed in his newspaper when his brother and chum returned.

"All fixed for tonight?" he asked as they entered the room.

"Almost," was Tom's reply. "Ralph call in the other men."

Ralph left the room, only to return in a few mo-

ments followed by the six troopers. To these Tom outlined his plan of action.

"Bowers," said Tom, addressing the man by that name, "I'll appoint you in command within the building. Holliday and Benton will be with you. Benton will report to Mr. Wheeler at 3.15 o'clock. Holliday will show up at the bank at three thirty, and Bowers, you wait until four. You will use your own discretion once you are inside.

"Griggs," turning to another, "you will act directly under me. Jackson and Saylor will come with us. I haven't decided yet just where we will take our stand. I'll have to look over the ground first."

"How about Ralph and me?" demanded Dick at this juncture.

"I have your places all picked out," declared Tom with a grin.

"That so?" asked Dick eagerly. "Where?"

"Right here in this room," declared Tom grimly. Captain Mahon is not here to intercede for you now, and I want it understood that my orders must be obeyed."

Dick, who had stood up suddenly at Tom's first words, now sat down again greatly crestfallen.

Ralph also subsided, but mumbled something unintelligible under his breath.

"I want you two boys to understand that I mean what I say," said Tom. "I know you would like

to get into whatever excitement offers itself, and I am sorry I have to deny you the privilege. But I'm responsible for your safety, and I want to make sure that you don't get hurt."

"Well, all right," Dick growled, "but I want to tell you I think its a shabby trick."

"It may be," Tom admitted, "but you've heard my last word on the subject."

And with this Dick and Ralph were forced to be content. As Ralph said: "I guess we're lucky to get this far. We'd better keep quiet or he's liable to ship us home."

"Right you are," Dick agreed. "Besides, its always possible something will turn up, you know."

In the afternoon, Tom, alone, strolled for half an hour up and down in front of the bank, outlining his plan of campaign. At three o'clock he was back in the hotel, attending to the departure of his men as they left, one at a time, to report to President Wheeler at the First National.

When Bowers, Benton and Holliday had gone, he called the others together for a consultation.

Briefly outlined Tom's plan was this: With Griggs, he would take his stand a block from the bank on Fifth avenue. The other two troopers would be a block away on the other side of the bank.

"We'll have to keep on the move," he explained, "for should one of the bandits spot us loitering about it might spoil everything. But even if we

are not all always in sight, one of us is bound to see the yeggmen if they appear."

And thus it was arranged.

Upon Tom's instructions, the troopers did not leave the hotel until after 11 o'clock. Until that hour Fifth avenue was crowded, and it was unlikely that an effort to break into the bank would be made at that hour.

But at half past eleven, Tom led the way from the hotel. Dick and Ralph, chafing at their bonds, so to speak, were left behind.

"If we don't get a look-in on the round up, I'll say its pretty tough," declared Ralph after the others had gone.

"I agree with you," replied Dick. "I'd give a nickel if something would happen that would let us in."

And, as has been said before, something did happen.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ROBBERY.

IN accordance with Tom's instructions, Dick and Ralph did not budge from their room in the hotel. Despite the fact that they discussed the situation at length, the time passed slowly.

Three o'clock came and then four without word from Tom or any of the other troopers.

"Looks as though nothing would happen," said Ralph.

For reply, Dick thrust his head out the window and looked down the street. For perhaps five minutes he saw nothing, then he caught the outline of a figure several blocks away. He felt sure that it was one of Tom's men.

"They're still on the job, anyhow," he said.

Daylight dawned and still the lads did not turn in.

"We'll stay up until they come back," Ralph declared.

To this Dick agreed.

It was seven o'clock when the door finally opened and Tom strode in.

"No sign of the bandits, eh?" said Dick in greeting.

Tom shook his head.

"None," he replied. "I guess the attempted robbery has been given up. However, I have left two men outside, and the men inside will remain until the bank opens for business at nine o'clock.

"Are you going to watch again tonight?" asked Ralph.

Again Tom shook his head.

"I think not," he replied. "Besides, we may have to hop to Allentown you know."

"It wouldn't surprise me if the bandits switched the dates and made the attempt here at the time set for the Allentown robbery," declared Dick.

"That's possible, too," Tom admitted. "However, we'll have to take a chance. I'm convinced, though, that if they don't make this attempt they won't make the other, either."

"Maybe not," said Dick. "Well, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to stay here until the bank opens," Tom replied "after which I shall interview the president once more and then we'll go home."

"You mean to Lancaster?" asked Dick.

"No, I don't. I'm going to see that you boys get back to Harrisburg first, and I'm going to leave you there. Then I shall report to Captain Mahon."

"I see," said Dick. "Figuring on getting rid of us, eh?"

"Exactly. And when I'm once rid of you, I'm going to stay rid of you. You can take my word for that."

"Perhaps," said Dick.

"No perhaps about it. But come! We'll go down and have a bite to eat. I see you haven't slept any, so you'll get no sleep until we get home. I want to leave here by ten o'clock if possible.

They descended to a restaurant below, where they appeased their appetites, and then returned to their room.

At nine o'clock Tom started for the bank. This time he permitted both lads to accompany him.

"There is no danger now; that's sure," he said.

But this time it was Tom who had reckoned without his host.

The president of the bank received Tom with a smile, and motioned his three callers to seats.

"I am glad to find that your fears were groundless," he said to Tom.

"And I'm not so glad," replied Tom, returning the smile. "I was in hopes to round up the bandits red-handed."

"Do you still anticipate the attempt?" asked the president.

"No, I don't," said Tom. "I shall leave with my men this morning."

"Well, I'm sorry you have been disappointed," said the president. "Perhaps some other time we can offer you more diversion."

"Perhaps," said Tom, rising. "I'm glad to have met you sir, and I trust I shall never have occasion to call upon a similar errand."

The two shook hands, and Tom moved toward the door, Dick and Ralph following him.

The president stepped quickly forward and opened the door that his visitors might pass out. Dick crossed the threshold first, and as he did so his eyes took in a sight that caused him to stop stock still.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed:

"What's the matter, Dick?" demanded Tom.

"Matter," said Dick, stepping quickly back, and closing the door, "is that the bank is being robbed at this moment."

"What!"

Exclamations were wrung from Tom and the president of the bank simultaneously.

"Perfectly true," said Dick. "There are two men out there with guns levelled at the occupants of the two cages. How many more I can't say. That's all I saw. What are you going to do about it?"

The president stepped forward as though to open the door, but Tom gripped him by the shoulder.

"Wait, he said. "Its certain death to go out there." He looked around. At the other end of the room was a window. "I'll go out this way," he said, as he crossed the room.

Dick and Ralph followed him.

"Wait a minute," said Tom stepping back. "Have you a gun, Mr. Wheeler?"

"Yes."

"Get it at once."

The banker opened a drawer in his desk and took therefrom a heavy caliber automatic.

"You still have yours, haven't you Dick?" asked Tom.

"You bet!" and Dick produced his weapon.

Ralph likewise put his hand into his hip pocket and drew forth its mate.

"All right," said Tom. "Now, I'm going out this window and take the bandits from behind. I won't have time to notify my men, so we'll have to take a chance as we are. When you hear a shot, open the door and rush out. Shoot the first man you see. Understand?"

"Perfectly," replied Dick.

"All right."

Tom climbed to the window sill, and disappeared. The others waited in silence, ready to act as soon as they heard the signal.

At last the signal came.

"Crack! Crack!"

Dick heard the two pistol shots in quick succession. His hand already on the door knob, he swung the door open without further preliminaries, and dashed from President Wheeler's office.

At the end of the long corridor which ran around the cages, enclosed by bars of steel, he saw two figures with revolvers levelled toward the other end of the building.

Without stopping to ascertain their possible mark, Dick raised his arm and fired. One of the men toppled to the floor, but the second, wheeling quickly in his tracks, fired at Dick.

Dick dodged instinctively as the man raised his arm, and the bullet whistled over his head.

But the bullet found a mark nevertheless. In dodging, Dick had exposed President Wheeler to the bandit's aim.

Struck in the breast, the bank president crumpled to the floor with a groan.

Stooping as he was, Dick fired again, but this time his bullet missed its mark, and the bandit betook himself to a position around the corner of the cage where he was out of Dick's range.

From the other end of the bank came the sound of firing, and Dick and Ralph dashed forward together.

When Tom left President Wheeler's office, he made quick time around the building and entered the bank again from the outside without being discovered. There he saw that there were at least eight bandits implicated in the attempted robbery. Two of these guarded the approach to the president's office, four others were at the cages, and two more had succeeded in forcing an entrance to the vaults behind the cages.

Tom knew it would be futile to call upon the bandits to surrender, for they outnumbered him too greatly. Therefore, immediately he re-entered the bank, he fired at the nearest man. The latter dropped in his tracks.

As he did so, the man nearest him wheeled and a bullet sped close to Tom. Tom returned the second bandit's fire, but the robber ducked and was

unharmcd. Tom sought shelter in the doorway.

Things were thus at a deadlock when Dick, Ralph and President Wheeler entered from the latter's office.

When Dick fired his first shot, Tom again went into action, and with a single shot dropped the bandit nearest to him as he wheeled to fire at Dick.

This left six of the robbers to contend with.

At this juncture, the man who had fled before Dick, seized the chance to take a shot at Tom. Although he fired from his hip, the bullet reached its mark, and Tom felt the sting in his left arm as the missile ploughed through the flesh. He was nevertheless able to continue the battle.

In the meantime, the men inside the vaults had been busy. While one stood guard, the other had stuffed his pockets with bills of large denomination.

"Quick Mike!" said the sentinel. "We've got enough. Get out your gun and we'll fight our way to the street!"

Together the men appeared around the corner of the cage, and opened fire on Dick and Ralph, who were closest to them.

By this time word of the robbery had been flashed to police headquarters. Citizens, attracted by the sound of firing, had investigated and learned what was going on. A crowd collected on the street close to the bank, but still at a safe distance. Each of the six remaining yeggmen realized that if he

were going to escape it would be by a bold and immediate dash.

Consequently, with guns blazing, the men who had been in the vaults, throwing caution to the winds, dashed from their places. Before Dick or Ralph, or even Tom, could stop them, they had joined the others. Then the six made a concerted rush for the door.

And Tom was the only man who barred their progress.

Regardless of his own danger, the brave trooper stepped into the open and fired point blank at the oncoming yeggmen,—once, twice, three times. One man dropped and another staggered, but kept on.

Tom went to the floor with a bullet in his hip.

Dick and Ralph, rushing after the bandits, emptied the contents of their revolvers into the ranks of the yeggmen. Another man fell but the remaining four passed through the door and leaped into a high-powered automobile at the curb.

Onlookers scattered right and left as they swept the street with their guns. Then, even as Dick and Ralph reached the doorway, the automobile began to move. A minute later it was lost to sight.

CHAPTER XIV.

DICK AND RALPH UNDERTAKE A MISSION.

DICK's first thought was for a means of conveyance in which to pursue the bandits. He looked around quickly. There were several automobiles parked in the street nearby. Followed by Ralph, he darted toward one. As he was about to leap into the machine, however, he stopped.

"Hurry," said Ralph. "What are you waiting for? They'll be beyond pursuit in a minute."

"We can't catch them," replied Dick. "Besides, we would be no match for them. We'll just have to let them go."

He led the way back to the bank, where employes already were working over Tom and the bandits who had fallen. A man that Dick took to be a physician pushed his way through the crowd and stooped over his brother, who still lay on the floor.

"Ralph," said Dick, "you run to the hotel and summon the troopers. I'll stay here with Tom."

Ralph hurried away.

"How is he, doctor?" asked Dick, as the physician who had been examining his brother arose to his feet.

"Oh, he'll be around shortly, but he'll probably be little lame in one leg and his left arm. The bullet in the hip must have paralyzed a nerve, which accounts for his sudden collapse; but it's not even serious."

Willing hands lifted Tom and carried him to a sofa in President Wheeler's office. The bank president had already been taken there, and a second physician had dressed his wounds. Fortunately, like Tom, the president was not dangerously wounded, although his wound was much more serious.

The physician who had attended Tom proved a good prophet. Five minutes later Tom suddenly arose to a sitting posture. There must have been some pain, for presently he touched the wound in his hip very gingerly.

"So," he said with a grin; "I stopped a bullet, did I?"

"Yes," replied Dick, who sat beside him, "but the doctor says the wound is not dangerous."

"But you'll be laid up for the better part of a week," declared the physician approaching.

"I can't afford to be laid up," Tom protested.

"I've work to do."

"Nevertheless, absolute quiet is essential," the physician replied firmly. "I shall have you removed to the hospital at once."

At this moment Ralph entered the room, accom-

panied by Tom's men. The latter expressed their regrets at Tom's injuries and disappointment at not being on hand to participate in the fight.

"Bowers," said Tom, "you rush to the telegraph office and flash the alarm. We may be able to head the bandits off. Holliday, you find out what efforts the local authorities are making to apprehend the yeggmen and give whatever assistance you can. I have no doubt posses are already being organized. Hopes of catching the men in this vicinity probably are slim, but we must overlook nothing. Bowers, you take two men, and Holliday, you take the others. I'll be laid up for several days, so I'll depend upon you to report to Captain Mahon. Further instructions will have to come from him."

The troopers took their departure.

"Now," said the physician, "I'll help you into my car and take you to the hospital."

Dick and Ralph went with Tom, and saw him made comfortable in a private room at the hospital. Then they sat down beside him.

"Isn't there something we can do, Tom?" asked Ralph.

"Do your parents know where you are?" was Tom's query.

"Well, they don't right now, but they will," replied Ralph. "I wrote them last night; I also wrote to my uncle in Pittsburgh. He has probably been alarmed at my absence."

"I should think so," said Tom. "Dick, father and mother should be home in a day or two. I guess the best thing for you boys to do is to go home."

"Wouldn't you like to have us go to Lancaster and report to Captain Mahon for you?" asked Dick.

"That might be a good idea," Tom admitted. "I'll be perfectly comfortable here, so you boys catch the next train into Pittsburgh, and then head for home. I suppose you will want to stop and see your uncle, Ralph?"

"Yes," Ralph replied. "As a matter of fact I am supposed to remain with him for some time yet. Dick was coming to spend a week or so with me in Pittsburgh, you know."

"Well, do whatever you think best when you reach Pittsburgh," said Tom. "If you don't care to go to Lancaster, I don't suppose it will make any difference."

"Oh, we'll go to Lancaster whatever else we decide to do," said Ralph. "Then I may remain in Harrisburg until Mr. and Mrs. Hazelton return and Dick can come back to Pittsburgh with me."

"Suit yourselves," said Tom, "but I would advise you to get started as soon as possible."

After some further conversation, the lads took their leave of Tom, returned to the hotel and paid the bills for all, with money Tom gave them, and made inquiries concerning pursuit of the bandits.

Two men who had been shot in the bank, they learned, were dead. Two more were badly wounded. The nearby country was being scoured by posses in high-powered automobiles for traces of the yeggmen, but so far no clue to their whereabouts had been found.

Having learned this much, the lads caught a train to Pittsburgh, where they arrived shortly after noon. They repaired at once to the downtown offices of Ralph's uncle. The latter was overjoyed to see them.

"I didn't know what could have happened to you Ralph," he said. "Your aunt has been almost distracted. I'll 'phone her at once that you are safe."

He did so.

"Now," he said, "what are you going to do?"

"Going to Lancaster," replied Ralph, and explained why.

Mr. Harkness—he was the brother of Ralph's father—listened almost incredulous to Ralph's account of his adventures.

"All I can say is that you want to be careful," he declared when the lad had finished his story. "Also, you had better explain your disappearance to your father and mother when you get home. I don't know whether they'll want you to come back to Pittsburgh or not. Your mother will think your aunt and I don't take very good care of you."

"Oh, I guess not, sir," said Ralph. "But we

must be going now. We'll probably be back in a few days."

"Aren't you going out to the house first?"

"No, sir; we won't have time. We can catch a fast train in just thirty minutes."

"All right. Then I won't detain you. Good-bye, Ralph. Goodbye, Dick. Come back whenever you can."

The lads left the office and hurried to the Pennsylvania station, where they arrived in time to obtain pleasant seats on the train.

"First stop Altoona," said Ralph, as the train began to move. "We should reach Lancaster by six o'clock."

They did. It still lacked a quarter of that hour when the train pulled into Lancaster. Dick and Ralph went at once to headquarters of Troop G, where they were fortunate enough to find Captain Mahon at liberty. The captain received them at once.

"So you two lads are uninjured at least," he greeted them, for he had already learned by wire of the McKeesport robbery and its attending results.

"Yes, sir," said Dick.

"That is good," said the captain. "Here," kicking out two chairs, "sit down and tell me all about it."

Dick did so, describing quietly the part he and Ralph had played in the battle.

"You did well," said Captain Mahon, when he had concluded "Your brother has reason to feel proud of you, Dick."

"Thank you, sir," said Dick, flushing with pleasure.

"And now that you have brought your brother's report to me, what are you going to do?" asked the commander of Troop G.

"Go home, I guess, sir," replied Dick.

"I see," said Captain Mahon. "I thought possibly you might wish to attend to a little matter for me first."

The captain's tone was inquiring, and he surveyed the lads keenly from beneath his eyebrows.

"Of, course, if we can be of any service, sir, we shall be only too glad," said Dick.

"We shall indeed, sir," Ralph agreed.

"I am convinced that you can," replied Captain Mahon without hesitation. "Now I'll tell you what. You must be both tired out. Suppose you go to a hotel, get a good night's rest and report to me tomorrow morning at eight o'clock."

"Very well, sir," replied Dick briefly.

"Then that's settled," said Captain Mahon, rising. "I'll expect you promptly in the morning."

He shook hands with the boys, who left at once. Comfortably installed in a room in the best hotel, a short time later, Dick suddenly asked:

"Wonder what the captain wants us to do?"

"Search me," replied Ralph. "Why didn't you ask him?"

Dick sniffed.

"I would have looked nice, wouldn't I?" he made reply. "I might have spoiled everything."

"That's true, too," Ralph admitted. "I believe Captain Mahon is a man who realizes the value of few words."

"Exactly my opinion; which is why I said nothing."

"We'll know in the morning, at any rate," said Ralph. "The thing to do is to get a good sleep tonight. I'm tired out."

"So am I. First, though, we'll have something to eat, and walk around for an hour. Then we'll feel more like sleeping."

This program was carried out, and it was almost two hours later that Dick and Ralph returned to the hotel and prepared to turn in for the night.

In spite of the fact that neither lad wished the other to know that curiosity over the mission proposed by Captain Mahon was worrying him, it was nevertheless a fact that each was so impatient with excitement, that it was late when sleep finally came to them. When it did, they slept peacefully untroubled by the events of the day, or the possibility of more exciting events in the days that were to follow.

CHAPTER XV.

ON ACTIVE SERVICE.

DESPITE the soundness of their sleep, both lads were astir bright and early in the morning. They were dressed and breakfasted satisfactorily by half past seven o'clock. Then they started for troop headquarters.

"We'll be on time, at all events," declared Dick, as they walked slowly along.

"Right," Ralph agreed. "Better a little early than a little late."

At five minutes to eight, they entered headquarters and make their way to Captain Mahon's private office. That worthy was already immersed in a stack of papers. He looked up as the lads entered.

"On time, I see," he said with a smile. "It is well. Punctuality is one of my greatest hobbies. I am glad you are prompt. Be seated. I'll be ready for you in a few moments."

The lads sat down and watched the troop commander as he sorted out his papers, making notations now and then and occasionally raising his voice to call one of his subordinates from the other room. But fifteen minutes after their arrival, he

pushed his chair back from his desk and faced the lads.

"Now," he said, "we can talk. He surveyed them earnestly for some moments, and then continued: "You are sure that you are ready to undertake this mission?"

"Perfectly, sir," replied Ralph, speaking for Dick as well.

"But you don't even know the nature of it," Captain Mahon protested.

"That doesn't matter, sir," declared Dick. "I am sure you would ask nothing beyond our ability to accomplish, and anything else we are ready to attempt."

"Good!" exclaimed Captain Mahon, slapping his knee with his right hand. "I like that. Now, then, to business."

He paused, and the lads saw that he was turning some matter over in his mind.

"Have you ever been in a little town called Ronessen?" he asked.

Dick shook his head.

"No, sir," he replied, "but I know where it is. Forty-five or fifty miles from Pittsburgh on the Monongahela river, if I am not mistaken."

"Right," said Captain Mahon. "To reach there it will be necessary to go to Pittsburgh and take an Erie train. The question is, do you care to go there?"

"If we can be of service, sir," interposed Ralph.

"Very well. Then I will outline the nature of my mission." Again the captain paused a moment before continuing: "Information has come to me that the headquarters of the bank bandit gangs with whom you have already been mixed up is in Ronessen. My information comes from a reliable source, but it is not absolutely authentic. What I want you boys to do is to go to Ronessen, look about, make careful inquiries and, if possible, verify this information. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly, sir," declared Dick.

"Very good. Now, we are aware of the identity of only four of the bandit gang. Of these, three have been accounted for. Tompkins and the man called Henry—last name unknown—are in jail. Smith is dead. That leaves only the man whose name you say is Allen.

"Ronessen, as you are of course aware, is only a short automobile drive from McKeesport, where the bank robbery was staged yesterday. It is my belief that the bandits have found shelter in the little town. Of course, as I have implied, the only man you could possibly identify is Allen. You may see him there. If not, you will make guarded inquiries, taking care to throw no suspicion upon yourselves. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," replied Ralph.

"Very good. Now please remember that I want

you to get into no danger. I do not believe that will be necessary. I am entrusting you with this mission because you have already proved your courage and discretion, and because I believe there is less likelihood of your being suspected than a man or men of more mature years. I can give you no instructions. You will have to use your own judgment. Are there any questions you would like to ask?"

"I think not, sir," said Dick.

"All right."

Captain Mahon opened a drawer in his desk and produced two badges. He passed one to each lad.

"These," he said, "are badges of the Pennsylvania state constabulary. It is true that you are not members of the troop, but the badges may come in handy. I can promise you that you will not be prosecuted for impersonation of an officer. I would advice you to keep them out of sight, however."

"Very well, sir," said both lads.

"I guess that is all," said Captain Mahon—"but wait. I'll give you a note to Captain Mitchell of Troop L, who commands in the territory including Ronessen. It is possible you will find him there, but I would produce the letter only in a case of extremity."

The commander of Troop G turned to his desk and wrote rapidly. Then he passed a paper to Ralph, who was nearest him.

"There," he said, "I guess that will do you."

Ralph thrust his badge into his trousers' pocket, and the paper into his inside coat pocket. Dick also concealed his badge, and the lads rose, as did Captain Mahon.

The troop commander extended a hand to each of the lads in turn and said:

"Goodbye and good luck. Report to me at the earliest possible moment, and remember to keep out of trouble."

He accompanied them to the door of the building, and watched them as they strode off down the street in the direction of the railroad station.

"Two good boys," he declared with a smile.

Two hours later the boys found themselves in Harrisburg, where they learned it would be necessary to change trains; also that they would have to lay over an hour.

"I've time to go home for a minute," said Ralph. "I'll explain to mother that I have a little business to transact for Captain Mahon."

"Won't she object?" asked Dick.

"I think not. Of course, I cannot reveal the nature of the business. Want to go with me?"

"I guess not. Think I'll go to the bank and draw a little money. We might need it."

"Good idea. I'll get some from mother."

"All right. Then I'll meet you here in fifty minutes."

The lads parted.

Both were back within the stipulated time, however, and found seats aboard the Pittsburgh express just before it started.

"Any trouble at home?" asked Dick.

"Nope. Mother wanted to know what it was all about, but I told her I could not tell the secret, and she let it go at that. She trusts me, fortunately. All she insisted upon, was that I keep out of trouble."

"I guess we won't get into any trouble," said Dick.

"I guess not. I had almost hoped we would."

"That's a pretty poor sort of a hope, if you ask me. We might not get out so easily next time."

"We've been pretty fortunate. I guess our luck will hold."

It was well along in the afternoon when the train pulled into Pittsburgh and the lads alighted.

"I don't believe it will be wise to continue to-night," declared Dick. "We'll land there about dark and will be stuck for the night. The hotel accommodations, if we find any at all, are sure to be bad. Besides, we won't be able to give a satisfactory account of our presence if we have to."

"Maybe you're right," said Ralph. "Then we'll go out to my uncle's and spend the night, and get an early start in the morning."

And thus it was arranged.

It was eight o'clock the following day when the two lads boarded a train in the Erie depot on the banks of the Monongahela river. They were refreshed after a good night's sleep, provided with sufficient money for their needs, and ready for any eventuality.

"It's almost a two-hour run," said Dick, as they settled back in their seats.

"That will put us in at a reasonable hour," replied Ralph. "By the way, how big is Ronessen anyhow?"

"Three or four thousand, I imagine," returned Dick. "It's more or less of a mining center, so we can expect to find some rough people there."

"Well, I guess they won't bother us."

"Not unless we bother them," replied Dick with a grin.

"You know what Captain Mahon said about keeping out of trouble," said Ralph, also smiling.

"We'll endeavor to follow instructions," Dick declared.

Half an hour later the train stopped in McKeesport and the lads craned their necks in an effort to see the bank which had been robbed two days before.

"Can't see it," said Dick.

"No," rejoined Ralph, "and we haven't time to get off and look."

"Guess not," Dick agreed. "I would like to stop off and see Tom, though."

"So would I, but I'm afraid it's impossible."

The train moved forward again.

Mile after mile the train followed the winding course of the narrow Monongahela.

Both lads were considerably interested in the scenery, for it was the first time they had traversed this route.

"Pretty poor looking country, if you ask me," declared Dick.

"Rather," Ralph agreed. "Don't think I would want to live around here."

"Nor I; but I can see that it would make a pretty good place for a rendezvous for a band of bank robbers."

"By Jove! That's so. Well, I hope we have some luck on this trip."

"So do I," declared Dick, "and some way I believe we shall."

"Hunch?" questioned Ralph with a grin.

"Call it what you will. I just feel that way. That's all."

Further conversation was precluded by the entrance of a brakeman, who cried:

"Ronessen!"

"Well," said Ralph, leading the way toward the door of the car, "here we are."

"Right," said Dick, "ready for whatever fortune may bring forth. Let's get off."

The train stopped, the lads alighted and turned their faces toward the heart of the town.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BOYS FIND A CLUE.

It was a dingy little town upon which Dick and Ralph cast their eyes when they alighted from the train. Black coal dirt was everywhere, while most of the men they passed on their way from the station apparently were fresh from the mines, and equipped with safety lamps and lunch boxes.

Ralph shuddered.

"What a place to live," he said.

"Oh, I don't know," Dick replied. "There are probably plenty of nice homes near the edge of town. I have heard that this is rather a rich little village.

"Well," said Ralph, "we're here. Now what are we going to do?"

"Suppose we find a directory and see if any of the names we are after are listed."

"We'll probably find a hundred or so Smiths," declared Ralph dryly.

"That's so, too. Guess we'd better pass him up. We're not likely to find so many Tompkins however."

They entered a corner drugstore and found a directory. Dick ran his finger down the page.

"Only three named Tompkins," he said. "I'll take their addresses, and we'll inquire the way to the three homes."

"What are you going to do there?"

"Try to get a line on our friend Tompkins. It may be he has relatives here, and it doesn't naturally follow that they would know he is a bank robber."

"But we don't know his first name," Ralph protested.

"We can describe him, can't we?"

"Of course; but—"

"Great Scott!" Dick ejaculated. "Don't go looking for trouble! We may be on a blind trail, he may not be known here at all and we may encounter many other difficulties; but don't go looking for 'em."

Ralph subsided.

Outside the drugstore they came upon a policeman.

"Probably the only one in town—chief and all," was Ralph's comment.

From the officer they learned the direction to the home of William Tompkins and they bent their steps in that direction. A boy answered their knock at the door. Dick gave a description of the man he sought, but the boy was unable to identify him.

"You might try Henry Tompkins on the next street, though," he advised.

Dick thanked the boy and acted upon his suggestion.

"One chance gone," said Ralph as they walked along.

"Yes; but we still have two more," replied Dick.

At the second house it was a woman who answered their knock.

"And you don't know his first name?" she asked.

"No, ma'am," replied Dick; "I don't seem able to remember it?"

"And what do you want with him?" the woman demanded.

"I've a message for him?" said Dick truthfully. He didn't believe it necessary to add that the only message he would like to give Tompkins, whom he had last seen in jail in Harrisburg, was that the McKeesport bank robbery had failed.

"From your description," said the woman, "the man you seek might possibly be Jim Tompkins, a distant cousin of ours. He was in Johnstown the last time I heard of him."

Dick was elated, but he gave no sign.

"It is possible he might be the man," he agreed. "I understand the man I am seeking was in Johnstown recently. Has he any friends here of whom I might inquire his present whereabouts?"

The woman hesitated.

"Well," she said at last, "Jim Tompkins has a lot of queer friends. I don't know much about them except that one is named Allen. I believe they're a bad lot, in spite of the fact that Jim is distantly related to us. They sleep most all day, but I understand they hang out in Tobin's pool-room on Main street most of the night."

"Thanks," said Dick. "I shall inquire there."

"If you will take my advice," said the woman earnestly, "you will have as little as possible to do with any of them."

Dick thanked her again.

"I shall linger no longer than is necessary, I am sure," he replied.

He and Ralph lifted their caps, and took their departure.

"By Jove! We've struck a lead," declared Ralph, when they were out of hearing.

"Looks like it," agreed Dick.

"But why didn't you enjoin the woman to silence?" demanded Ralph. "She is likely to spread word that someone is looking for Tompkins, and tip the others off."

"She would have been all the more certain to do so had I asked her to be silent," was Dick's reply. Ralph looked at his chum in surprise.

"Why?" he demanded.

Dick shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know," he replied; "and maybe I'm wrong; but I'm acting on Tom's advice. I heard him say once that it was not wise in his business to let any man or woman think he or she was in a secret—that it would be a secret no longer."

"Maybe so," said Ralph. "But what next?"

"Tobin's poolroom, I guess. Fortunately, we have both played on your uncle's table, so we won't look like novices. While there, we'll make a few guarded inquiries. But we don't want to stay any longer than necessary."

They stopped in a store, and were directed to the poolroom. A moment or so later they were deeply engrossed in a game, as though they had nothing else on their mind.

Once the proprietor passed near, and Dick said:

"Have you seen anything of Jim Tompkins lately?"

The man looked at him sharply.

"Why?" he demanded.

"I've got a message for him," said Dick quietly.

"Well, he comes in some times in the evening," said the proprietor. "If you'll give me the message I'll see that he gets it tonight."

Dick shook his head.

"Can't do that," he replied.

"Why?"

"I was told not to."

The poolroom proprietor considered the matter a moment.

"I'll tell you," he said at last, "some of his friends come here most every night. Chances are they'll be in tonight. If you're around I'll point them out to you. Maybe you can give the message to one of them."

"I can give it to Allen," said Dick, taking a shot at random.

"Allen hasn't been around lately," said the man. "Won't any of the others do?"

"Whom, for instance?" asked Dick.

"Well, Larry Bannister."

Dick drew an envelope from his pocket, concealed the back of it carefully and appeared to read.

"Bannister will do," he said.

"All right. By the way, who is this message from?"

"It's from Henry," said Dick, taking another long chance.

"Oh!" exclaimed the poolroom proprietor.

It was plain to Dick that he knew the man.

"We'll be back this evening, then," said Dick.

"About what time?"

Again the man considered.

"Make it about nine o'clock," he said at last.

The two boys went on with their game as the man walked away. Fifteen minutes later they laid down their cues, paid for their game and went out.

"Where to?" asked Ralph.

"I saw a small hotel down the street," replied Dick. "We'll go there and get a room. We'll probably have to spend the night here, anyhow, and we can talk there without fear of being overheard."

Ralph considered this a good plan, and offered no objection.

The hotel, though small, was clean and they were shown to a comfortable room.

"Well," said Dick, sinking into a chair after the clerk who had shown them up had left, "we seem to have fallen into a nest of them."

"It certainly looks that way," Ralph agreed. "Now, take the proprietor of that poolroom. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if he were a member of the gang himself."

"Nor me; in fact, I'm almost convinced that he is. He knows too much about the others for one who is not on intimate terms with them."

"Right. I wonder if he suspects us?"

Dick shook his head.

"I don't believe so," he replied. "My opinion is that they are alarmed at the long absence of Tompkins, who is in jail with Henry; Smith who is dead, and Allen, who apparently hasn't returned.

I am sure he believes I am bringing a message from one of them."

"But we can't keep up the deception very long," declared Ralph. "What are we going to tell this man Bannister when we see him tonight?"

Again Dick shrugged.

"I don't know yet," he confessed, "but we'll try and not give ourselves away."

"If we do," said Ralph, "they won't have much mercy on us, you may be sure of that."

"Well," returned Dick, "we're in the game. We'll have to do the best we can."

"Oh, I guess we'll come through all right."

"Of course we shall. I don't know whether there are any state troopers in town or not, but I'd rather not appeal for help unless it's absolutely necessary."

"I agree with you there. It will be a feather in our caps if we can get the real dope and turn it over to Captain Mahon."

"I wasn't thinking so much about that," Dick declared. "My reason is that I don't want to be seen talking to a trooper. We don't know who may be implicated with this gang and somebody might tip them off to the fact that we are altogether too friendly with a member of the constabulary."

"I hadn't thought of that," Ralph admitted.

"No," Dick continued, "the best thing we can

do now is remain quietly in the hotel, and return to the poolroom at the appointed hour."

And this was the program the lads followed.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RENDEZVOUS.

It lacked only a few minutes of nine when Dick and Ralph entered the poolroom that night. The proprietor greeted them with a smile.

"Not here yet," he said. "Have a table at the other end of the room and play a game on the house. Bannister should be here within half an hour with some of the others."

The lads deemed it wise to fall in with the proprietor's suggestion, so they were soon interested in their game in spite of the exciting situation in which they found themselves.

From time to time men left or entered the poolroom, and Dick frequently gazed toward the proprietor with an inquiring glance; and each time the latter shook his head.

The lads had been playing perhaps fifteen minutes, when three men entered the poolroom together and engaged the proprietor in conversation.

The latter nodded to Ralph and Dick, and the lads laid down their cues and approached.

"This," said the proprietor, whose name Dick learned was Martin, "is Bannister," and he nodded toward a man of about thirty years, who stood nearest the door.

"Yes, I'm Bannister," the man admitted. "I understand you have a message for me?"

"If you're Bannister I have," said Dick, "but how can I be sure of your identity?"

"You might ask any man in the room who I am," replied Bannister with a grin. "I guess they all know me."

Dick hesitated a moment, apparently turning the matter over in his mind.

"I guess it's all right," he said at last. He looked around the room furtively. "Is it all right to talk here?" he asked.

Bannister nodded.

"Safe as a church," he replied. "Give me the message."

"It's verbal," said Dick. "Henry couldn't give it to me in writing."

"All right," said Bannister impatiently, "tell me then."

"Henry," said Dick, "is in jail in Harrisburg."

"What!" exclaimed Bannister starting back.

"It's true," said Dick. "He was arrested several days ago."

"What's he charged with?" demanded Bannister, motioning the others to be silent.

"Charged with being implicated in a bank robbery in Johnstown," replied Dick.

"And how do you know all this?" demanded Bannister suspiciously.

"I was in police headquarters when they brought him in."

"You were, eh? Why?"

It was here that Dick found it necessary to draw upon his imagination, but he was convinced that the means would justify the end.

"I was there to get my brother out," he replied. "For a few seconds I was close to Henry, and he whispered to me. He gave me the names of Tompkins, Smith and Bannister in addition to Allen. I was to find you and give you his message."

Bannister drew a breath of relief. Apparently his suspicions, if he had any, had vanished.

"And what's the message?" he asked.

"The message," said Dick, "was to go slow with any more jobs, and to get him out of jail."

"What kind of jobs?" demanded Bannister, and Dick knew the man was trying to find out how much he knew.

"I don't know," he replied. "Now, I've delivered the message. Henry said you would return our railroad fare and give us something for our trouble."

"He did, did he? Well, you boys have done well. I guess that is no more than right. Will fifty dollars cover your expenses and be pay enough."

Dick stimulated surprise.

"Oh, yes indeed," he replied. "We didn't expect any such sum as that."

"You've earned it," said Bannister, and produced some bills, which he passed to Dick. "And what are you going to do now?"

"Go home as soon as we can," Dick replied, "but I don't suppose we can get a train till morning."

"You can't," said Bannister. "You'd better go to the hotel. I'd advise you, however, to go first thing in the morning. You are both too young to be running around the country by yourselves."

After some further conversation, Dick and Ralph left the poolroom.

"That was some tale you concocted, if you ask me," declared Ralph admiringly as they walked along. "I don't know how you did it."

"I had to think of something," said Dick.

"Well, you thought of a whole lot, but I don't see what you have gained by it."

"We've simply verified the fact that Bannister, Martin and the others are members of the gang," said Dick. "That strikes me as a good deal."

"That's so, too," Ralph admitted, "but—"

"And the next thing to do," continued Dick, un-

heeding the interruption, "is to trail them to their rendezvous. Before we could do that we had to know who they were."

"By Jove! My mind doesn't seem to be working very well," declared Ralph.

A block from the poolroom the lads halted. Dick took his bearings and stepped into a dark doorway, pulling his chum after him.

"They're almost sure to come this way," he said. "When they pass we'll go after them."

The lads took turns peering from the doorway. Half an hour passed—an hour, and still the men did not emerge from the poolroom.

"Maybe they went out another way," suggested Ralph.

"Don't think so," returned Dick. "I didn't see another door."

"Then maybe we didn't see them when they came out."

"I think they're still there, all right," said Dick. "We'll wait awhile longer."

The time passed slowly, but at last the lad's patience was rewarded.

Three figures appeared in the doorway of the poolroom and headed toward the place where the boys were concealed. The latter shrank as far back as possible in the dark doorway, and knelt on the floor.

Bannister and two companions brushed by with-

out seeing them. Immediately the lads got to their feet. Dick peered after the trio.

The three men turned north at the first corner. Dick and Ralph at once left their place of concealment and headed after them. At the corner Ralph peered round cautiously. The men were some distance away.

Dick and Ralph advanced into the open and followed them.

Straight toward the railroad tracks Bannister led the way. Dick drew close to Ralph.

"Maybe they're going to take a train," he said.

"Bannister said there wasn't another train tonight," Ralph replied.

"So he did," Dick said. "I had forgotten. Wonder where they are going?"

"Probably have a rendezvous near the tracks," returned Ralph.

The lad proved a good guesser.

Across the tracks the boys followed the men ahead. There, Bannister in the lead, the quarry turned to the left, continuing a hundred yards down the track, where they turned right again.

In the darkness, Dick and Ralph could make out the dim outlines of what appeared to be a small shack. The lads stopped when it became apparent that the shack was Bannister's destination.

"There's where they hold forth, at any rate," whispered Dick. "We've trailed them to their lair,

now all that is left for us to do is notify Captain Mahon."

"Maybe we can hear what they are saying if we get close enough," Ralph suggested.

Dick hesitated.

"It's dangerous," he said at length.

"Pooh! What of it?" demanded Ralph. "Besides, since when did you grow so cautious?"

"Have it your own way then," returned Dick with a grin. "But don't blame me if we get into trouble."

"I'll take the blame," declared Ralph.

The two boys advanced cautiously until they were right up against the shack. They listened intently, and through the thin partition could dimly hear the sound of voices within. The words, however, were unintelligible.

"Can't hear what they are talking about," whispered Ralph. "We'll have to do better than this."

Without asking Dick's advice, he tip-toed forward and laid a hand on the knob of the closed door. This he turned gently, and as gently pressed against the door. It moved inward without a sound.

Ralph did not advance across the threshold. Such had not been his intention. He stepped back to Dick's side, and again the lads listened.

The voices from within came more plainly to

their ears, and they could make out the nature of the conversation.

"I tell you, Bannister," said a voice, "I don't altogether trust those boys."

"Pshaw," returned Bannister, "they're honest enough. What would be their idea in coming here if Henry didn't send them?"

"Maybe the authorities sent them," said another voice.

"They are too young for that," Bannister declared.

"Maybe so; but I tell you I don't feel just right about it. There is something wrong all around. Why didn't Allen return after that McKeesport job? And the others? They haven't been captured or we should have heard of it.

"It is strange," Bannister admitted.

"Then, too," went on the other, "where are Smith and Tompkins? These boys say Henry is in jail. Maybe Tompkins and Smith are there, too—or maybe they have been shot."

"Maybe—maybe—" taunted Bannister. "Maybe we're all in jail, and don't know it. I tell you the thing to do is go to Harrisburg and find out. At least some of us should go."

"And walk into a trap," said another voice.

"Perhaps," said Bannister. "It's a chance we must take. I'll go, if you fellows are afraid."

"It isn't that," said the man who had protested. "I just want to be on the safe side."

"At all events, there is nothing to be done to-night," said Bannister. "Let's move."

There was a chorus of agreement. Footsteps moved toward the door.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RALPH IN TROUBLE.

"WE'VE better be moving from here," said Ralph in a hoarse whisper.

Dick did not take the trouble to reply. Instead, he started toward the railroad tracks at a run, Ralph close behind him. Both lads knew that discovery at this time might prove dangerous, so they made every effort to get out of sight before Bannister and his friends emerged from the shack.

But in this attempt their efforts were futile.

Bannister emerged first. A hundred yards away, as he glanced toward the railroad tracks, he saw two figures scurrying for shelter. With a shout to his companions, Bannister made after them.

Bannister's shout told Dick and Ralph that they had been discovered, and each lad realized that it behooved him to put his best foot forward.

They increased their pace.

Now, Dick was a faster runner than Ralph and he found it necessary to slow down a bit so that his chum might catch up with him.

"Don't wait for me, Dick," gasped Ralph as he ran along.

"Nonsense," replied Dick. "We'll have to stay together."

Ralph renewed his efforts. Behind them the lads could hear the sound of pursuing footsteps, which seemed to grow louder, indicating that the pursuers were gaining.

The boys crossed the railroad tracks and darted up the street just beyond, heading for their little hotel. Once inside, they felt, they would be safe, for it did not occur to either that Bannister and his friends would have the temerity to pursue them within.

Dick, glancing over his shoulder, saw that Bannister and his two companions indeed had gained. They were less than seventy five yards behind. Dick took Ralph by the arm and endeavored to help him along.

The lads could now make out their hotel in the distance, and this stirred Ralph to greater efforts. He sprinted, and for a few seconds was ahead of Dick. The latter soon came up with him, however, and they continued the race side by side.

The lads reached the hotel with their pursuers

less than fifty yards behind. Inside they dashed and headed straight for the desk, where the night clerk, a young fellow, was leaning. Beside the desk they sank into chairs.

"Breathe easily if you can," Dick warned Ralph. "We may escape suspicion after all."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when Bannister dashed into the lobby, followed by his two companions. Dick and Ralph arose to their feet. Bannister stopped in his tracks and surveyed the scene.

"Come here," he said, motioning to the lads.

Dick and Ralph obeyed. Bannister scrutinized them carefully.

"What were you doing along the railroad tracks a few moments ago?" he asked.

"Railroad tracks?" exclaimed Dick in surprise. "What do you mean?"

Bannister took Dick by the arm.

"You know what I mean," he replied. "Come, tell me what you were doing there."

Dick shook his head in well simulated surprise.

"It's too much for me," he said. "Ralph and I have been sitting here for the last hour, so we couldn't have been near the railroad tracks."

The night clerk had been an interested listener. He had scowled slightly as Bannister and his friends entered the hotel, which would have told a close observer he had not much use for the trio.

This fact was to prove fortunate for Dick and Ralph.

Bannister wheeled on the clerk.

"How long have these boys been here?" he demanded.

"I should say fully an hour," replied the clerk.

Dick turned to Bannister.

"That's what I said," he declared.

Bannister seemed to breathe easier.

"Tell me," he said, "what happened to the two men who dashed in here a moment ago."

Here, to Dick's relief, the clerk interferred again.

"They went through the back hall and probably out into the alley," he said.

Bannister considered the situation a moment. Then he motioned to his companions.

"You go after them, he said at last. "Maybe you can pick up the trail. I'll stay here until you come back."

The men followed instructions.

"Now," said Bannister, motioning Dick and Ralph to seats and taking a chair himself, "I want to say that I'm not convinced you are telling the truth."

"But the night clerk—" Ralph began.

Bannister snapped his fingers.

"That for the night clerk," he replied. "He's no friend of mine, and might go out of his way to make trouble for me. He may be lying, too."

However, I can afford to take no chances. We'll wait here until my men return. Then I'll decide what to do."

They had not long to wait. Ten minutes later Bannister's companions returned.

"What luck?" demanded Bannister getting to his feet.

"None," said one of the others, with a shake of his head. "We couldn't see a soul."

Bannister nodded. Then he addressed Dick and Ralph again.

"You may be telling the truth," he said, "but, as I said before, I cannot afford to take chances. Just to make sure of you, I have decided to take one of you along with me for safe keeping."

Dick and Ralph started to their feet in alarm.

"What do you mean?" demanded Ralph.

"Why," said Bannister, "I shall hold one of you as a hostage. You've told me you were going home in the morning. That program need not be changed for one of you; but the other shall stay here with me. I'll take him to Harrisburg in a day or two."

"But—" began Dick.

Bannister raised a hand.

"Argument will do no good," he said. "I am in authority here. Which one of you will go with me?"

"Well," said Dick, "if it comes to that I'll go, of course."

"No, Dick, let me go," Ralph protested.

"Not much. I—"

"Come, come," said Bannister. "I have no time for this foolishness. However, I'll give you both a sporting chance."

He produced a half dollar.

"I'll spin this," he said. "One of you call heads, the other tails. The one who calls the coin correctly has the choice of going or staying."

He spun the coin, caught it as it came down and covered it with his hand.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Heads," said Ralph.

"Tails," said Dick.

Bannister uncovered the coin.

"Heads it is," he announced. Then, turning to Ralph, "Well, will you go or stay?"

"I'll stay," Ralph decided promptly.

"Very well," said Bannister. Then to Dick. "Your friend will be perfectly safe with me, providing I find everything is all right. I figure to go to Harrisburg in behalf of Henry day after tomorrow. I shall bring your friend with me. But if I should walk into a trap—"

He broke off, but his silence was more expressive than words.

"Ralph," said Dick, "won't you change your mind and let me go with Bannister instead."

Ralph shook his head.

"Come, young one," said Bannister. "I can wait no longer."

Dick and Ralph shook hands.

"Don't worry," Ralph urged. "Everything will turn out all right."

He preceded Bannister and the others through the door, while behind Dick sank down in his chair in despair. He was still there when the night clerk, who introduced himself as Harry Dooley, sat down beside him.

"Tell me. What's all this about?" he demanded. "Maybe I can help."

The young man's voice was so kind, and his face so honest, that Dick did not think he would do wrong to confide in him. Accordingly, he told him everything.

"By Jove! You're pretty young, both of you, for this sort of work," he declared. "But have no fear, your secret is safe with me. I shall help you if I can. Now what are your plans? Will you go home in the morning and leave your friend here?"

"I believe it would be best," Dick declared. "I can arrange such a reception for Bannister and his friends when he gets there that he'll wish he had not come. Besides, if he keeps his word and brings

Ralph with him, there will be no danger for Ralph."

"I guess you are right," agreed Dooley. "If you stay here, Bannister would know it and it would only add to his suspicions. No, you had better go. In the meantime, I will endeavor to keep an eye on Bannister and I will keep you posted by wire. How is that?"

"Immense!" cried Dick, springing to his feet and grasping Dooley's hand. "I'll go directly to Captain Mahon and outline the situation. He will know what steps to take to intercept Bannister and his crowd and rescue Ralph."

"Exactly," the night clerk agreed. "Now you go upstairs and get a good sleep. I'll call you in time to catch the first train."

Dick followed instructions, and in spite of his uneasiness, soon was fast asleep.

It seemed that he had hardly closed his eyes when he was awakened by a rapping on his door.

"Who is it?" he demanded sleepily, as soon as he could collect his thoughts.

"Dooley," was the reply. "Time to get up or you'll miss your train."

Dick dressed hurriedly and descended to the lobby. A glance at his watch showed him it was five o'clock. Dooley greeted him when he came down.

"You won't have time to eat till you get to Pittsburgh," he said. "Now don't worry. Everything

will be all right. I'll wire you care of Captain Mahon, as I promised."

They shook hands and Dick hustled for his train.

CHAPTER XIX.

RALPH ESCAPES.

RALPH, when he left Dick, went with his captors without a word. Nor did Bannister, or his companions address him.

As Ralph had expected, Bannister led the way back to the shack along the railroad track where he and Dick so recently had overheard the conversation of the bandits. Inside, Bannister struck a match and lighted a lamp.

Ralph made out that the shack was furnished with a single table, half a dozen chairs and two dilapidated sofas.

"This will be your prison until I get ready to leave Ronessen," said Bannister. "You will always be under guard, and will not be permitted to leave the shack. Meals will be brought to you, but they will be light. You'll have to satisfy your appetite on sandwiches and the like. That's the best you'll get."

"All right," said Ralph, "but when do you expect to leave? How long must I remain here?"

"No longer than I can help," replied Bannister, answering the lad's last question. "I want to leave here day after tomorrow. You will have to put up with my hospitality until then." He turned to one of his companions. "Timmons," he said, "it's up to you to stand guard tonight. Hill will relieve you in the morning, and I shall spend tomorrow night here myself."

There were no objections on the part of the others, so after some further words, Bannister and Hill left.

Timmons, once the others had gone, motioned Ralph toward a sofa.

"There's you're bunk," he said. "I'll sleep on the other one. But listen, youngster! No monkey business. The door is locked and I'm a light sleeper. If you try to get away I'll have to punish you."

Ralph made no reply. Instead he threw himself on his bunk. Timmons blew out the light, and also sought his bed.

For at least an hour Ralph lay in the darkness turning the events of the past twenty-four hours over in his mind. He reflected upon the possibility of escape. After some consideration, he put such thoughts aside for the moment. He knew that even should he elude Timmons and get out of the shack,

he could not leave Ronessen until morning; and there was always the possibility that he would be re-captured before he could catch a train.

He closed his eyes, and finally slept.

Timmons was astir when Ralph opened his eyes in the morning.

"I wish Hill would hurry and get here," Timmons complained. "I've got to see a man at ten o'clock."

Nine o'clock came and still no signs of Hill.

"I can't stay here much longer," said Timmons with an imprecation. "I'll wait until nine-thirty, and if he's not here then I'll lock you in and go out anyhow."

Ralph, noting the single window in the room, hoped that Hill would not arrive in time.

But in this the lad was doomed to disappointment.

At nine twenty-five there was a rap on the door. Timmons unlocked it and Hill entered.

"I'm a little late," he apologized, "I—"

"You bet you're late," declared Timmons angrily. "I'm afraid I'm late for an appointment now."

"Well, I couldn't help it," said Hill.

"Maybe not; but that doesn't alter the fact that I'm late."

He went out and slammed the door. Hill locked it after him.

Now Hill, Ralph soon found, was a more pleasant companion than Timmons, and presently he produced a small package from his pocket.

"Sandwiches," he said, laying the package on the table, "four of 'em. Thought you might be hungry."

"Thanks," said Ralph. "I am."

He untied the package and proceeded to devour the sandwiches. His thirst he quenched from a bucket of water that sat on the table.

"Water's about gone. We'll have to have some more," he said.

Hill eyed him quizically.

"Want me to let you go after it, eh?" he said with a grin.

Ralph returned the grin.

"Wouldn't be a bad idea," he said. "I'll give you my word that I'll come back."

"No," said Hill after a pause, "I guess not. I'll get the water myself. There's a spring fifty yards from the shack. Don't try any foolishness while I'm gone. I've got a gun here and I'm a pretty fair shot. I can see the door and the window from the spring."

He picked up the bucket, unlocked the door and went out.

Ralph was sorely tempted to ignore Hill's injunction and to make a break for liberty through

the window. From his pocket he produced his revolver and examined it carefully. It was loaded.

"Glad I'm so young they didn't think it necessary to search me," he muttered. "Wonder if I hadn't better hold Hill up when he comes back?"

But he discarded the idea. Ralph was still only a boy and as such he was naturally fearful of a man of mature years. It would take something in the nature of danger to stir him to action.

Hill returned a few moments later with the bucket of water.

"See you didn't try to escape," he grinned.

"What was the use," demanded Ralph. "You said you had a gun, didn't you?"

"I did," Hill agreed, "but the fact is I was lying."

Ralph smiled.

"Oh," said Ralph, crestfallen, "I didn't think of that."

"I didn't figure you would," said Hill.

The day passed slowly, but at length darkness fell and Bannister appeared. Ralph noticed that there was something wrong with the man the minute he entered the room, but it needed a whispered word from Hill to tell him what was the matter.

"He's been drinking," said Hill under his breath. "He's evil tempered when under the influence of liquor. Be careful and don't cross him."

"Well, Hill," said Bannister. "Did the prisoner behave himself today?"

"Yes," said Hill.

"Very well. You may go now. "I'll stand guard tonight. I want to catch an early train in the morning and will take the prisoner with me. You report to Timmons. He has instructions as to where to meet me. By the way, I had a wire from Allen. He's heading for Harrisburg. We'll all be there tomorrow night."

Hill departed, and Bannister turned to Ralph.

"You roll into bed there," Bannister ordered.

From his pocket he produced a bottle, the contents of which Ralph knew to be whiskey. Ralph, from his sofa, watched the man as he sat there, at the table, head in hands, from time to time taking a drink from the bottle.

Suddenly Bannister rose and approached Ralph.

"Boy," he said, "I want you to tell me the truth about your trip to Ronessen."

"I have told you," declared Ralph.

"And I believe you have lied. Now I want the truth, or I'll choke it out of you."

He leaned over Ralph, and there was something menacing in his attitude that Ralph cowered back.

With one hand Bannister jerked him from the sofa and to his feet. Then, with doubled fist and angry countenance, he ordered:

"Come, now, the truth."

For an instant Ralph considered what to do. He

knew that, under the influence of liquor as he was, Bannister was not responsible for his actions.

Bannister drew back his fist.

On that instant Ralph acted.

His hand went to his pocket and he produced his weapon. Moving back a step, he covered Bannister.

"One step toward me and you're a dead man," Ralph said calmly.

Forgotten now was all his fear of a man, just because he was a man. He knew that he held a weapon with which to protect himself, and he was determined to do so.

Bannister, at sight of the revolver, stepped back quickly, but his fear was only momentary.

"Put down that gun," he said quietly, and Ralph knew that sight of the weapon had sobered him up.

But now, with the issue squarely drawn, Ralph determined not to delinquit his advantage.

"I mean what I say," he declared. "One step forward and I fire."

"And once more I tell you to drop that gun," said Bannister.

This time Ralph made no response, but he stood his ground.

For a moment Bannister hesitated, then he sprang forward.

"Crack!"

Ralph pressed the trigger and dodged to one side.

Bannister staggered, but he turned in his tracks and again advanced.

Again Ralph pressed the trigger. Bannister threw up his arms, spun around on his heels and then crashed to the floor, overturning the table in his fall.

The room was shrouded in darkness.

For a moment Ralph stood nonpulsed at the result of his shooting. Then he realized that he must get out of the shack.

He groped his way across the floor until his hand touched Bannister's fallen body. He explored the pockets, and at last got to his feet with the key to the door in his hand.

"The quicker I get out of here the better," he told himself.

He unlocked the door with a trembling hand and passed out into the cool evening. Without looking back, he headed quickly for the railroad station.

He found the agent just about to close the station.

"No more trains until morning," said that worthy.

"Great Scott! I can't hang around here," he said.

He walked to the street. From a passing pedestrian he learned the way to the Pittsburgh road.

"I'll walk till morning," he said, and started off in the darkness.

CHAPTER XX.

DICK MAKES HIS REPORT.

DICK's return trip to Lancaster was made without incident. Captain Mahon was out when the lad reached his office, so Dick cooled his heels impatiently in the ante-room until the commander of Troop G arrived.

"Well," said Captain Mahon, after motioning the lad to a seat near his big desk, "I hope you had good luck."

"Some good luck and some bad luck as well," was Dick's reply.

"Explain," said Captain Mahon shortly.

Dick did so, and the Captain listened intently, until he had concluded.

"You were a bit rash," he said. "You should have been satisfied with learning that the headquarters of the bandit gang really is in Ronessen. I would have taken care of the rest. However, you have done good work. I have no doubt that this man Bannister will carry out his intention of going to Harrisburg, and he will as surely bring

Ralph with him. We shall have to lay our plans to trap them when they get there."

"Then you don't think they'll harm Ralph, sir?" Dick asked.

"No. He is of more value to them with a whole skin. You say they will reach Harrisburg tomorrow?"

"So Bannister said."

"Then we must be prepared. Now, I take it that you wish to see this thing through?"

"Of course, sir.

"Very well. Report to me at seven o'clock this evening and I shall have further instructions for you."

With this Dick was forced to be content. He left troop headquarters and spent the afternoon in the moving picture theaters. At six he dined in a small restaurant, and promptly at seven reported again to Captain Mahon.

"Punctual again, I see," said that worthy. "It is well. Have a seat."

Dick did so, and for some moments Captain Mahon was busy at his desk. Then, raising his voice, he called:

"Martin!"

A young man in regulation constabulary attire responded to the summons.

"Martin," said Captain Mahon, "this," indicating Dick, "is Richard Hazelton, brother of Tom

Hazelton, of the force. He is the boy I spoke to you about this afternoon. He will go with you to Harrisburg tonight. You will find he is a lad of discretion as well as resourcefulness and valor. He may be able to furnish you with some valuable tips."

Dick and Martin shook hands.

"Glad to meet you, I'm sure," said the trooper.

"Thanks; I'm glad to meet you, too," Dick replied.

"Anything further, captain?" asked Martin.

"No," was the reply. "I gave you all necessary instructions this afternoon."

Martin saluted, Dick said goodbye to Captain Mahon and the two left the room.

"We'll pick up the others at the train," said Martin to Dick as they went down the steps to the sidewalk.

"Others?" said Dick inquiringly.

"Yes; you didn't think we were going to tackle this job alone, did you?"

"I didn't know," returned Dick. "There are probably other troopers in Harrisburg."

"There'll be enough on hand this time to take care of the gang," declared Martin. "I don't intend to let a man get away."

Dick made no reply, but muttered to himself:

"Pretty cocky, this fellow. Must be young at the game. I wish Tom were here."

This put him in mind of something else, so he asked:

"Have you heard anything of my brother—how he is getting along?"

"Yes; Heard Captain Mahon say today that he was progressing favorably."

"I'm glad of that," declared Dick.

By this time they had reached the station, and Dick made out fully a dozen other members of the constabulary loitering about. These came forward when they saw Martin, and the latter addressed them.

"We'll split up," he said. "When we get to Harrisburg, we'll put up at the Columbus. Look up my room, all of you, and report to me tonight at eleven o'clock."

The troopers scattered.

Dick remained close to Martin, and took a seat with him aboard the train. Dick said little during the trip, for he saw that Martin did not wish to be disturbed.

"Probably cooking up a reception for the bandits," the lad told himself.

Arriving in Harrisburg, the two went directly to the Columbus hotel, where, at Martin's suggestion, they took separate rooms.

"But I could just as well go home," said Dick.

"Guess you'd better stay at the hotel," replied Martin. "I might need you in a hurry, you know."

"That's true," Dick agreed, and said no more.

In the lobby of the hotel they separated.

"I won't need you tonight," Martin declared.

"However, I suppose you'll be in your room?"

Dick nodded.

"Thought I'd step out and get a bite to eat, and possibly walk around for an hour, though," he said.

"That is, if you have no objections."

"I guess it will be all right," said Martin hesitatingly.

Dick waited for no more. He turned on his heel and left the hotel. On Market street he found a little restaurant conducted by two brothers who were Greeks. Both these he knew well, having been a frequent patron of the place.

"I'm pretty hungry, Anthony," he said, as he sat down at a small table. "Fix me up something nice, won't you?"

Anthony smiled and hurried away.

Half an hour later the lad left the restaurant. He strolled about the streets for perhaps an hour, then returned to the hotel and went directly to his room which was next to that occupied by Martin.

As he passed the latter's door, he saw a light streaming through the transom and caught the sound of voices within.

"Guess he's giving instructions for tomorrow to his men," the lad muttered. "Well, I'm not going

to say anything, but I don't think a whole lot of that fellow."

He entered his room and went immediately to bed.

It was broad daylight when he awoke. Springing out of bed, he looked at his watch.

"Eight o'clock," he exclaimed. "Wonder if the others are astir yet?"

He dressed quickly. Passing into the hall, he knocked at Martin's door.

"Who is it?" came the query in a sleepy voice.

"Hazelton. Thought maybe I'd overslept. Will you be out soon?"

"No reason for getting up yet," said Martin. "I'll meet you downstairs at ten o'clock."

Dick made no reply but walked away muttering to himself.

"They used to tell me that the early bird catches the worm," he said. "This fellow Martin is just as likely to let the bandits slip through his fingers as not."

Nevertheless, he was in the lobby at ten o'clock. Martin appeared half an hour later.

"Had breakfast?" he asked of Dick.

"Yes," was Dick's reply.

"Well, I'm infernally hungry," said Martin. "Come into the dining room with me while I have breakfast."

There was nothing for Dick to do but obey.

Martin ate deliberately, a morning paper spread out in front of him.

"Wonder what he wants me here for?" Dick muttered. "He hasn't said a word since we sat down."

At last Martin rose, paid his check and with Dick at his side returned to the lobby, where he sat down.

"Don't you think we had better get down to the station?" Dick found courage to ask at length. "Those fellows are likely to come in, and we'll miss them."

"Now don't get worried, youngster," Martin advised. "My men are on the job. They'll pick up any suspicious looking characters."

"Yes, but they won't know Bannister when they see him," Dick declared. "Nor will they know the others. Besides, none of them would answer to the description of being suspicious looking characters. I thought Captain Mahon sent me along to pick them out for you."

"Maybe you thought too much," said Martin, plainly nettled.

"Maybe I did," said Dick angrily. "I don't want to question your plan of action, but it seems to me we should be doing something."

"I tell you there's no hurry," Martin protested. "Those fellows can't possibly reach Harrisburg before noon if they left Ronessen this morning."

"Maybe they left last night," said Dick.

"But there is no train out of Ronessen after six o'clock."

"There are automobiles."

"Maybe so; still, I'm of the opinion that we should be on the lookout."

Martin made no reply, but continued to scan his newspaper. It was after half past eleven o'clock, when he arose and signified that he was ready to move.

"By George! Its about time," declared Dick to himself, for he had been fidgeting uneasily in his seat.

He followed Martin out the door of the hotel and down Third street to Market, where they headed toward the station.

"We'll get there in time, son," said Martin.

"I hope so," said Dick. "I'm uneasy about my chum. If he—"

He broke off suddenly with a startled exclamation.

Martin looked at him inquiringly.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

For answer Dick pointed to an automobile that was at that moment rounding Fourth street from Market. There were four or five figures in the machine.

"There's Bannister! In that car!" the lad cried excitedly.

CHAPTER XXI.

RALPH'S RUSE.

WHEN Ralph started off along the lonely Pittsburgh road from Ronessen, he walked rapidly for some distance.

"I'd better get as far as possible," he told himself. "They're likely to come after me."

For several hours he continued at his best pace. Then he became tired and walked along more more slowly. As he walked, he turned over the events of the last few days in his mind.

"By Jove!" he muttered. "I'm liable to have spoiled everything. The fact that I shot Bannister and escaped will prove to the others that I was armed. If I didn't kill Bannister, there's no knowing what he'll do when he comes to himself. If he's badly wounded, he will put the others wise and set them after me. He will also call off the trip to Harrisburg. If he isn't badly hurt, he'll be a lot more careful if he decides to carry out his plans. I don't know what Dick will think, but I couldn't stand there and let him beat me up.

"Oh, well," he continued talking to himself as he trudged along, "what's the use of worrying. I've done the best I knew," and he quickened his pace.

As day broke, Ralph approached the little village of Elizabeth. At the edge of town he stopped to rest, thinking he would not go in until some place might be open where he could get a cup of coffee.

While he rested, there came to his ear the hum of an approaching automobile. As it came near he drew back out of sight.

"Might be someone looking for me," he muttered.

Almost opposite where the lad stood concealed, the automobile stopped. A man alighted and looked at the engine.

It was Banister, apparently none the worse for his encounter with Ralph a few hours before.

"I must have hit him somewhere," was Ralph's mental comment, "but he's a tough one, all right."

Directly Bannister climbed back in the machine, and it was at that moment that Ralph was struck with a sudden thought.

"I'll lose them, he told himself, "and I don't know when I can get a train."

As the machine began to move, Ralph darted from his place of concealment and sped after the car. Seizing the rear fender he drew himself up behind. Fortunately for the lad, the curtains were down, and he could not be observed from within.

Holding on tightly, he made himself as comfortable as possible.

The speed of the automobile increased and Ralph found it difficult to hang on as the machine jolted

over the rough road. Nevertheless he clung to his precarious perch.

When the machine reached McKeesport, it went through the city with only slightly diminished speed. Another idea struck Ralph.

"I guess they're heading for Harrisburg, all right," he told himself. "If I stick here I'll spoil everything if discovered. Besides, I believe I can make as quick time by train."

As the machine slowed down at a crossing he jumped off. So fast was the car going that the lad rolled in the dirt, but he picked himself up unhurt. He brushed himself off as well as possible, then hurried back to Fifth avenue where he caught a car marked "Wilmerding."

The ride to Wilmerding consumed half an hour. There, much to the lad's disappointment, he learned that he could not catch a train for two hours. Several trains would pass through before then, but the first local was a good two hours away.

Nevertheless he managed to pass the time somehow, and at the end of the two hours he climbed aboard a train bound for Harrisburg. From the conductor he learned that a fast express not far behind would pass the local at Altoona. By catching the express at Altoona, Ralph knew, he would save all of half a hour.

"They'll get there ahead of me in the machine,"

he said, "but I'll get the express anyhow. The sooner I get there the better."

Accordingly, at Altoona he changed trains. Aboard the fast express, with Harrisburg the next stop, he felt more comfortable. He looked at his watch. It was only ten o'clock. He would reach Harrisburg by half past one.

Ralph was making good time. It was only a little after four when he had climbed aboard the bandit automobile in Elizabeth. The run to McKeesport had consumed less than an hour and a half, and he had caught a train in Wilmerding at eight. Nevertheless, the lad knew that the bandits, by avoiding the roundabout route he had taken, in all likelihood would reach Harrisburg before he did.

It lacked fifteen minutes of two when Ralph stepped from the train in the Pennsylvania state capital.

"Now to find Dick," he said.

He hurried to a telephone, where he called Dick's home. There was no answer.

"Wonder if he can still be in Lancaster?" he muttered. "I hardly think so, though. Captain Mahon must have taken all necessary steps to apprehend the bandits, and Dick ought to be here, too. The question is—where?"

He strolled on to Market street. There, stand-

ing on a corner, he saw three state troopers. Ralph stopped.

"Wonder if there is any significance in their being here?" he asked himself. "I'll find out." He approached the men. "Do you know Tom Hazleton?" he asked of one.

"Of course," was the reply.

"Do you know his younger brother, Dick?"

"No."

Ralph thanked the man and was about to pass on, when a second trooper exclaimed:

"Hold on youngster."

Ralph waited expectantly.

The trooper who had spoken last turned to the others.

"Isn't that the boy who came from Lancaster with us?" he asked.

"By Jove! I believe you're right, Ed. Come to think of it, I am certain he was Tom's brother. What do you want with him youngster?"

"I want to see him," said Ralph. "I went on a mission with him for Captain Mahon, and—"

"Anything to do with bank robbers?" interrupted the man called Ed. Ralph hesitated.

"I—" he began.

"It's all right, son," said the trooper. "You don't need to make a secret of it. We're here on the same case."

"Then where is Dick?" demanded Ralph.

"You mean Tom Hazelton's brother?"

"Yes."

"Well," said the trooper called Ed, "I don't know exactly where he is, but he's in Harrisburg some place. He came with us last night. But how about the bandits? Are they coming?"

"Coming!" exclaimed Ralph. "They must be here by this time."

The trooper shook his head.

"You're wrong there," he declared. "We've been watching every train, and we've seen nothing that looks like a bank robber."

"But they didn't come by train," cried Ralph.

"Then how—"

"Automobile!" exclaimed Ralph. "I rode behind as far as McKeesport, jumped off, took a car to Wilmerding and caught a train. They certainly must have reached here ahead of me."

"Ed," said a second trooper, "the boy's right. The bandits must have eluded us."

Ed muttered an imprecation.

"It's Martin's fault," he declared. "I knew something was wrong when he didn't show up this morning. Either he's still in bed, or he's found trace of the bandits."

"Probably still in bed," said another sarcastically. "I don't understand how Captain Mahon happened to put him in command of this party."

"Nor I; but the question is what to do now."

"You know as much about it as I do."

"Guess one of us had better get the Captain on the phone. He'll tell us how to act."

"Just a minute," said Ralph. "Perhaps I can help?"

The men looked at him in surprise.

"What can you know, youngster?" asked Ed. "You've only arrived. You don't know where they are."

"No, but I know where one of their rendezvous is," said Ralph.

"So?" said Ed. "That might be worth investigating. Bill, you get Captain Mahon on the phone, round up the other fellows and meet us at the hotel in an hour. Frank and I will accompany this boy to the rendezvous he speaks of. It may be a wild goose chase, and then again it may develop something."

Thus it was arranged. The man addressed as Bill hurried away, while Ed addressed Ralph.

"Lead the way, youngster," he said.

Ralph headed west on Market street, Ed and Frank following.

To Ralph it seemed only yesterday that, accompanied by Tom and two police officers, he had made the same trip in an automobile. At Twelfth street, he turned to the right and advanced directly to the house where, not many days before, Dick had been

held prisoner by Tompkins and his fellow bandits. In front of the house he halted, and in a few words related the incidents that had occurred at that time.

"It's hardly likely they will be here," said Ed, "and still it is possible. You say these fellows are unaware of the fact that the others have been arrested?"

"Exactly," Ralph replied, "which is the reason they may be here now."

"There's something in that, Ed," declared Frank. Ed nodded.

"We'll have a look, at all events," he declared grimly.

The three climbed the steps and rang the bell.

"Don't let anybody close the door in our face," Ed enjoined. "When its opened, stick a foot inside."

A moment later the door was opened a trifle, and the same woman who had answered Tom's knock some nights before looked out and inquired:

"What is wanted?"

"We're looking for a man named Bannister," replied Ed.

"No one by that name here," replied the woman, and pushed on the door.

But Ralph quickly thrust a foot forward and prevented its closing.

"We'll have to satisfy ourselves on that score, ma'am," said Ed, and pushing her gently to one side, he strode in.

Frank and Ralph advanced upon his heels.

As the three pushed by her, the woman uttered a loud scream. This was followed by the sound of scuffling feet in a room at the end of the hall.

"Quick!" cried Ed. "They must be here!"

He dashed forward, his fellow trooper close behind him.

His heart palpitating rapidly, Ralph followed the trail of his companions.

CHAPTER XXII

MARTIN PROVES INCAPABLE

"Now, don't get excited, Hazleton."

This was Trooper Martin's admonition when Dick caught sight of the automobile bearing Banister and his companions along Fourth street.

"But there they go!" cried Dick.

"All right," said Martin. "Then we'll get a machine and follow them."

At that moment a taxi drove past. Dick signalled the driver and he and Martin jumped in.

"Follow that car, driver," said Martin. "Don't lose sight of it."

The driver nodded his understanding of the

instructions, and the machine started off at a rapid gait. The other car at the time was going slowly, so the pursuers had no difficulty keeping it in sight.

It crossed the Mulberry street bridge, and turned to the right at the second cross street beyond. Two blocks beyond fourth street, it came to a halt. Martin ordered his driver to stop also.

From the car ahead a man that Dick recognized as Bannister climbed slowly to the ground and with some difficulty ascended the steps of the house before which the machine had stopped.

"We'll wait till he comes out," said Martin. Apparently they have not reached their destination, or they would all have gone in."

Fifteen minutes later Bannister reappeared, climbed into his machine, which drove off. Without instructions, the driver of the pursuing car made after them.

At the first street the machine turned to the left, and again to the left.

"We're heading back down town," Dick remarked.

Martin nodded, but said nothing.

Dick proved a good prophet. The chase led again across the bridge, where the pursued turned east on Market street, passed under the railroad tracks and started up the hill beyond.

"By Jove! I know where they're going," ejaculated Dick.

"That so?" said Martin, showing more interest than he had previously manifested. "Where?"

Then Dick related the events of the night he, Ralph, Tom and the two police officers had pursued Tompkins and the other bandits.

"I've no doubt you're right," was Martin's comment. "The place evidently is a rendezvous. We should be able to trap them there."

"Hadn't we better make sure that's where they're going and then go for reinforcements?" asked Dick.

"We need no reinforcements," declared Martin. "I intend to arrest them single-handed."

"That's a pretty fair-sized order," remarked Dick.

"Not so big as it would seem," declared Martin. "One look at my uniform and they'll throw up their hands. Perhaps you don't know the traditions of the state constabulary."

"I know they never lose their man," replied Dick, "but I never heard of any such thing as you suggest. I'm afraid you'll find they won't surrender so easily."

"Pooh!" said Martin. "Just take my word for it."

But Dick remained unconvinced.

Five minutes later the car ahead drew up before the very house where Dick had been a prisoner not so many nights before. The pursuers halted some distance away. From there they watched the men disappear in the house.

"Take my advice and go around the back way," said Dick. "There may be some chance of getting in there. If we go the front way and ring the bell, our birds will disappear before we can get in."

"That might be a good idea," Martin admitted.

Dick led the way around the house, and he and Martin climbed the short flight of stairs to the rear door.

"No need to knock," declared Martin.

He laid a hand on the knob and threw open the door. Then, walking lightly he stepped inside. Dick was close behind him.

The two found themselves in a kitchen, which was darkened by drawn blinds. Once inside they stopped and listened. They could hear voices in the next room.

"They're in there, all right," Martin said.

"Yes," Dick agreed, "but take my word for it, it will be no easy task to apprehend them."

"Pooh!" said Martin again. "You stay here if you're afraid."

"I'm not afraid," Dick protested, "but I believe that discretion is the better part of valor."

"They won't even attempt to put up a fight," said Martin.

"Don't you believe it. I've had some experience with their kind."

"Well," said Martin, making himself ready, "I'm going in. You can do as you like."

"Oh, I'll go," said Dick.

"We'll go quietly, and take them by surprise," said Martin.

They tiptoed across the floor and the trooper put his hand on the door knob. Then, with his automatic thrust ahead of him, he threw open the door and stepped inside, with Dick at his heels.

"Hands up!" cried Martin.

Instantly all was confusion inside the room. Four men who sat about a table sprang to their feet. The hands of the man nearest Martin went into the air, as did the hands of the man covered by Dick's weapon.

Not so the others.

There was a sharp 'Crack! Crack!' as Bannister, who sat farthest away, fired twice.

Dick felt something whiz past his ear and was also conscious of a sting in his arm.

Instinctively the lad pressed the trigger of his own revolver, but his aim had been spoiled and the bullet went wild. Before he could recover himself, Bannister sprang forward and pinned his arms to his side. The bandit was a powerful man and Dick realized that the best thing he could do was to offer no resistance. A deep, red line across Bannister's temple attracted Dick's attention, and he wondered how it came there.

While Dick was thus rendered helpless, Martin was having his own troubles. He had succeeded in

putting one robber out of business, but the others were un-awed by his weapon. The last man he covered, suddenly dropped to his knees behind the table. This put him out of range and Martin, there-upon, lost all command of the situation, although he fired two more shots in an effort to save himself.

An instant later, Dick saw Martin stagger.

Looking down, he discovered that the man beneath the table had thrown his arm around Martin's leg.

Martin kicked out with his right foot and succeeded in freeing himself. Stepping back he was about to wreak vengeance upon his kneeling assailant, but ere he could fire, the fourth man of the quartet leaped upon him and held him in his grasp, until his companion arose from the floor.

Held by the two, Martin was powerless.

"Tie 'em up!" commanded Banister. "I'll hold this youngster till you do."

A length of rope was quickly produced from a closet, and with this Martin's arms were soon securely fastened, and the officer was deposited unceremoniously in a chair.

"Tie this one up too," Bannister instructed.

It was the work of only a few minutes to bind Dick, who also found himself deposited in a chair.

Bannister glared at Dick.

"So, my suspicions were correct, eh?" he ex-

claimed. "Well, you shall suffer for the trouble you have caused me."

"Where is my friend?" demanded Dick.

"None of your business. However, if it will do you any good, I'll tell you that I have put him away in a safe place?"

"Have you harmed him?" cried Dick, struggling with his bonds.

"What if I have?"

"If you have, you'll pay for it. You may be sure of that."

"Who'll pay me, I'd like to know," said Bannister with a grin.

"I will, if no one else," Dick declared angrily.

"Doesn't look that way now, does it?" laughed Bannister.

"Maybe not," Dick was forced to admit. "But my time will come."

"Now," said Bannister, "I want to ask you a few questions. Is it true that the man you describe as Henry is in jail here?"

"I can't see any harm in answering that," Dick declared. "He is."

"And where are Tompkins, and Allen, and Smith?"

"Tompkins," replied Dick, "is also in jail here, unless he has been removed to Johnstown. Smith is dead. I don't know where Allen is. I know he was

mixed up in the McKeesport bank robbery, but I don't know where he went when he fled."

"You seem to know a lot, nevertheless," declared Bannister,—“altogether too much, to my way of thinking. I guess I'll have to treat you as I did your chum?"

"How was that?" demanded Dick.

"None of your business; but you'll know soon enough. Timmons, dump these fellows into that closet, will you, and lock the door?"

Martin was disposed of first, then Dick.

It was dark inside the closet, although a faint light streamed under the door.

"Well," said Dick to Martin. "Here we are."

"Right," Martin agreed, "here we are."

"And we wouldn't have been here if you had followed my advice and gone for reinforcements," Dick declared. "These fellows wouldn't have got away in the meantime. Looks like they were here to stay awhile."

"Perhaps," Martin admitted. "I'll confess my plans miscarried, but who would have expected these fellows to offer fight after seeing my uniform."

"I would," declared Dick shortly.

"Think you're smart, don't you," sneered Martin.

"Smarter than you are," Dick replied.

"When I get you outside I'll turn you over my knee."

"A good job—if you can do it," said Dick. "I don't think you can."

"What! You defy me?"

"Why not? You're not much of a state trooper, if you ask me."

"Why—"

What Martin might have replied Dick never knew. For at that moment the doorbell rang. There was a scraping of chairs in the room in which the two prisoners were locked, indicating that the occupants, startled, were getting to their feet.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Dick under his breath. "It's just like it happened before. But Tom is in the hospital, and nobody but Ralph, Murphy and Delehanty know of this place. Now, I wonder—"

CHAPTER XXIII.

RALPH TO THE RESCUE.

"THEY'RE back in there!" cried Ralph, as he pushed aside the woman who had blocked his entrance into the house where Dick and Martin were now held prisoners, and hurried through the hall. "I'm sure of it."

"Hold on, youngster; don't be too swift!" warned the trooper Ed. "We're likely to put our heads into

the lion's mouth if we're not careful. I'm sure the sound of shots we heard, came from here. These yeggs are full of fight."

"Right you are, Ed," was the comment of the second trooper. "We'd better be careful."

Even as he spoke, a head appeared, as its owner peeked through a slightly opened door at the end of the hall, and a shot rang out.

"Good advice, Frank," said Ed grimly," but a little late. There's nothing to do now, but to rush 'em."

The three sprang forward, as the door was slammed shut.

The hall was reasonably wide, so that the two troopers and Ralph were able to keep out of range of any bullets that might be fired through the door, by standing close to the door and keeping their backs to the wall. From this position of safety, Ed raised his voice and called upon those within the room to surrender, in the name of the law.

The only reply was the splintering of wood, as the bandits fired through the door.

"This'll never do," said Ed. "Suppose you sneak out the back way, Frank, and touch 'em up through the window."

In response to the suggestion, Frank quickly made his exit.

"You'd better get out, too, youngster," was Ed's advice, as more shots came through the door.

"I'm not afraid," declared Ralph stoutly.

"I didn't say you were; but there is no need of your mixing up in this fracas."

"I've been mixed up in it for some time, and I'm going to see it through," was the lad's prompt rejoinder.

"All right. Have it your own way; but keep out of range."

From without came the sound of a shot.

"Frank in action," Ed explained. "Hope they don't pot him."

Frank's shot was followed by a cry of pain from within.

"Score one for us," said Ed. "Guess we might have a little more action here. Stand back a bit."

Ralph did as commanded,

Ed approached the door, placed the muzzle of his revolver against it and fired three times.

Came another cry of pain from within.

"Chance shot, but it worked," said the trooper quietly, skipping back to avoid the return fire. "They'll have to change their tactics, or we'll do for them."

The sound of firing outside was repeated, indicating that Frank was still in the fight. His last shot must have told, for suddenly the door flew open and two men appeared in the doorway.

Ed and Ralph fired together and one man fell. The other, backed by a third, who sprang over his fallen

companion, were upon the trooper ere he could fire again and Ed went to the floor with a dangerous wound.

The hall and the room were now so filled with smoke, that almost hid the combatants from each other. Taking advantage of this condition, Ralph fled, fully realizing how foolish it would be for him to continue the unequal combat. One of the men started to give chase, but Bannister called upon him to stop.

"Let him go," he said. "There are probably more of them around somewhere. Make for the automobile!"

Once outside the house, and finding that he was not pursued, Ralph slowed down, and finally turned back to investigate.

There was no sign of the men who had emerged from the room, but as Ralph turned the corner of the house he espied Frank hidden behind a tree.

"They've gone!" cried Ralph.

Frank came toward him.

"All of them?" he inquired.

"Three," replied Ralph. "I don't know whether there were more or not."

"Where's Ed?"

"On the floor in the hall."

"Shot?"

"Yes."

Together they hurried to Ed's side. The latter

stirred slightly as they bent over him, and a few moments later sat up. He placed a hand to his side.

"Got me in the ribs," he muttered.

Frank examined the wound.

"Nothing dangerous," he said, "but it will require attention. Lend a hand youngster."

They lifted Ed and carried him into the room the bandits had so recently quitted, where they laid him on a couch.

Ralph looked around, and gave a startled exclamation. On the floor, arms outstretched lay the man called Timmons, who had guarded him the first night of his captivity in Ronessen. The lad's startled exclamation drew Frank's attention to the prostrate figure.

"We did for one of 'em, anyhow, eh?" he said. "Well there is one less bandit in the world."

Again he gave his attention to staunching the flow of blood from Ed's side.

In the meantime, Ralph made a tour of the room. As he came to a closet at one side, he thought he heard a noise within.

"Frank," he called.

The trooper was at his side instantly, ready for any enemy that might appear.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

"There is somebody in this closet," Ralph declared.

"That so? Then we'll have him out."

He laid a hand on the knob and pulled, but the door would not open.

"Locked," he said. "Hello! There's a key in the lock."

He turned it and then gave the knob another wrench. This time the door flew open, and two bound figures were exposed to view.

"Prisoners," said Frank in surprise.

Together he and Ralph entered the large closet, and each drew back with an exclamation of surprise.

"Martin!" ejaculated Frank.

"Dick!" cried Ralph.

"It's me, all right," replied Dick ungrammatically.

"Untie me, will you?"

It was the work of an instant to untie the two prisoners, who stepped outside and rubbed their numb arms.

"How'd you get here, Dick?" exclaimed Ralph in the utmost surprise.

"That will keep," returned Dick. "The question is, how did you get here?"

"That will keep, too," Ralph grinned.

In the meantime Frank and Martin were in deep conversation.

"Where did the bandits go?" asked Martin.

"Search me?" was Frank's reply. "I was outside when they rushed Ed and this youngster here. I don't know just what happened. Ed, as you can see, isn't in any condition to talk much."

"How did you happen to let them get away?" demanded Martin sternly.

Frank looked at his temporary commander in astonishment.

"How'd we happen to let them get away?" he repeated. "You don't think we did it on purpose, do you?"

"Possibly not; but you should have captured them."

"How?" demanded Frank. "There were only two of us, and the lad here."

"That doesn't matter. It was your duty to apprehend them. You should have made the attempt anyhow."

"What do you think all this shooting was about?" Frank wanted to know. "We did tackle them, but they were too many for us. By the way, Martin, how did you happen to get in that closet?"

Martin flushed, but it was Dick who answered.

"I'll tell you," he said hotly. "He insisted that the robbers would throw up their hands the minute they caught sight of his uniform."

"Wha—what?" said Frank, his mouth open in astonishment.

"Exactly," replied Dick. "Had he not been so bull-headed, not one of them would have got away."

"Bull-headed, am I?" cried the now aroused Martin. "I'll show you. I—"

He stepped forward and struck at Dick. But the

lad had been expecting some such move. He dodged, and before Martin could recover his balance, Dick's fist shot out. Struck squarely on the nose, Martin reeled backward and clapped a hand to his injured nasal organ. When he withdrew the hand it was red. He stepped forward again to continue the fight, but Frank interposed.

"Here, none of that," he said to Martin. "Pick on somebody your own size. The lad did right."

"You defend him?" cried Martin. "I'll report you for insubordination."

"Do," said Frank pleasantly. "I have a tale to tell that Captain Mahon would be glad to hear."

Martin said no more, but instead turned his attention to Ed, who was now sitting up on the couch.

"If you ask me," said Ed, "I think both of these boys have behaved splendidly. It is you who are to blame, Martin. All the boys questioned your ability when you were put in command of this party, but there was no resentment and everyone of them was willing to do his best to help you. I can't say how they will feel in the future."

"We must get after the robbers," said Martin, apparently stirred to some semblance of action by Ed's words. "Which way did they go?"

"How should I know?" demanded Ed. "I was lying unconscious on the floor."

"Maybe I can help a bit," said Dick.

"Do, then," urged Ed.

"My idea," said Dick, "is that they will return at once to Ronessen, hoping to reach there in time to warn other members of the band should they seek refuge there. It is true they will realize their headquarters has been discovered, and they probably will abandon it. I figure, however, that much of the stolen money and bonds is hidden somewhere in Ronessen. Bannister will figure it is worth a chance to try and get it."

"That's good reasoning, youngster," declared Ed. "Now, my advice to you, regardless of what Martin may say, is to go immediately to Lancaster and report to Captain Mahon. He will know how to act. As for me, Frank here will see that I am taken to a hospital and get the necessary medical attention."

"Right, Ed," Frank interposed.

"Then I shall return to Lancaster, too," Martin declared.

The others offered no comment. Frank found a telephone in another room and called an ambulance. Half an hour later Dick and Ralph left the house, and a short time later boarded a train for Lancaster. Martin, they found, was a fellow passenger.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TOM REJOINS THE CHASE.

"So," said Captain Mahon, looking up as Dick and Ralph entered his office, "you have come to report that the bandits are safely lodged in jail, eh?"

"No, sir," Dick replied, "we haven't. The truth is they all got away, except one."

Captain Mahon sprang to his feet, and at the same moment, Martin, who had been slightly behind the lads entered the room.

"What!" roared the commander of Troop G. "How did they get away?"

"I'll explain, sir," Martin interposed.

"Do," said Captain Mahon shortly.

"Well, sir," began Martin, "this youngster here," and he indicated Dick, "and myself tackled the bandits in their rendezvous without the necessary support. They put up a fight and we got the worst of it. Later Ed, Frank and this other lad appeared on the scene and the bandits fled, leaving one of their number dead behind them."

"I see," said Captain Mahon. "How does it happen you were forced to attack superior numbers? Where was the rest of your force?"

"We were—ah, separated," said Martin.

"So it seems; but what I want to know is why?"

"I can explain that sir, if you'll allow me," Dick interposed.

"Explain then," said Captain Mahon, sitting down again.

"The reason," said Dick quietly, "was because Martin here wouldn't get out of bed until ten o'clock."

Again Captain Mahon came to his feet with a roar.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"The boy is mistaken, sir," Martin protested. "Its true I did not see the necessity of arising early, but that had no bearing on events that followed."

"Yes, it had, sir," Dick declared.

Captain Mahon resumed his seat.

"Now let's get this straight," he said quietly. "Martin, what time did you get up?"

"It was almost ten, sir," Martin confessed.

"What disposition had you made of your men?"

"I had them posted at the station, sir."

"And how did you expect them to identify the robbers?"

"Well, I—I—I don't know exactly, sir. The men should have been able to pick up any suspicious looking characters."

"Not one chance in a hundred," declared Captain Mahon. "So they eluded the men, eh?"

"They entered the city by automobile sir."

"And where were you?"

"Young Hazelton and I were just on our way to the station."

"And you gave chase?"

"Yes, sir; in another car. We attacked the men in their rendezvous, were overpowered and locked in a closet."

"And were released by Ed and Frank when they arrived on the scene?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did they find you?"

"I don't know, sir."

"I can explain that sir," Ralph interposed.

Captain Mahon signified for him to do so.

"I'd been there before, sir," said Ralph. "It was simply a chance, and the two troopers I encountered on the street were in favor of taking it."

"You did well," said Captain Mahon, and then turned to Martin. "I am sorry I cannot say the same for you, sir," he said, "but the fact is you were negligent in your duty. I shall take this matter up with the colonel and I may as well tell you now that I shall recommend your discharge from the force."

"But, sir—" began Martin.

Captain Mahon raised a hand to silence him.

"There is no good arguing," he said. "You may go now."

Martin strode toward the door. At the threshold he stopped and shook a fist angrily at Dick.

"I'll get even with you for this," he declared.

At that moment a figure stepped through the open door, and a heavy hand was laid on Martin's shoulder.

It was Tom Hazelton.

"Who is this you are going to get even with?" said Tom. Then without awaiting a reply; "Listen to me, Martin; if you have any grudge with a member of the Hazelton family, come to me with it."

He released his hold. Martin disappeared through the door.

Dick and Ralph sprang across the room, and the former grasped his brother's hand heartily.

"I supposed you were still in the hospital," he said. "I'm certainly glad that you are well enough to be out."

"And so am I, Tom," Ralph declared.

"I wasn't as badly hurt as the doctor thought," said Tom with a laugh. "It will take more than that to lay me up for long."

"And I'm glad you're out again, Hazelton," declared Captain Mahon. "This bandit chase has been sadly mixed up, so if you are fit I'll put you back in charge of the case."

"Never felt better sir," said Tom, "except for a little stiffness."

"Very well. Then you can get busy at once," and

as briefly as possible Captain Mahon outlined events that had taken place since the day of the McKeesport bank robbery.

"Captain," said Dick when the commander of Troop G had finished, "I hope you won't let Tom send us home now, just when things are getting interesting."

Captain Mahon turned to Tom with a smile.

"What do you think, Hazelton?" he asked. "Seems to me these lads have rendered service such as to justify their claims to be in at the finish."

"It would seem so, sir," Tom agreed.

"Then we may go with you, Tom?" exclaimed Dick.

"I guess, so," said Tom, after a moment of hesitation. "But how do you know I shall leave Lancaster?"

"Why, you're going to Ronessen, of course," said Ralph. "That is undoubtedly where the bandits have gone. At no other place will you be able so easily to pick up the trail."

"You're a pretty shrewd youngster," declared Tom. "Yes, I suppose that is where I shall go next."

"And the sooner the better, Hazelton," said Captain Mahon.

"Guess you're right, Captain. "How many men shall I take."

"Half a dozen will be enough I guess. You may pick them yourself."

After some other conversation, the three took their leave. Outside Tom chose half a dozen of his fellows, who he instructed to meet him at the depot at six o'clock in the evening.

"We'll eat now," he told his young companions.

When they had satisfied their appetites, Tom, with a glance at his watch, decided that it was still too early to head for the station.

"We'll go to the gymnasium," he said. "There'll be some of the fellows there and we can kill time easier."

Dick and Ralph offered no objections, and Tom led the way.

As Tom had predicted, the gymnasium, fitted up for the use of the troopers, was fairly filled, the troopers being engaged in various forms of athletics. The first man upon whom Dick's eyes alighted was Martin.

The latter sighted Dick and his companions at the same time. At the moment he was playing hand ball with two other men. He left the court and approached Dick and his companions.

"You are trying to have me fired from the force," he said, "and I don't intend to stand for it. You've got your brother with you now, but the first time I find you alone I'll repay you with interest."

"That so?" said Dick with a grin. "Better look out, or you'll bite off more than you can chew."

"And if that isn't enough I'll take a hand myself," Tom declared.

Martin sneered.

"That's right," he said, "he isn't big enough to look out for himself."

"I'm big enough to take care of you, though," declared Dick angrily. "If you don't think so, just try me."

"I'd try you right enough, if you weren't three to one," declared Martin.

By this time a crowd had gathered around.

"Don't let him bluff you, youngster," said a voice. "I think he'll run the first time he's hurt."

Martin whirled on the speaker.

"You attend to your own business," he shouted, "or you and I will mix."

"No such luck," said the other trooper. "The boy there is about your size."

"You bet I am," said Dick, "and if he'll put on the gloves with me, I'll show him a thing or two."

"That's the spirit, youngster," cried several of the men together, and other voices took up the cry: "Get the gloves! Get the gloves!"

Tom took Dick by the arm.

"Look here; you can't do this," he said.

"Why?" demanded Dick. "He's no bigger than

I am, and no stronger. He may be a couple of years older, but that's all.

"He's at least five years older," Tom protested.

"What of it? I'm almost a match for you, and I know Martin isn't."

By this time the clamor for gloves had grown to shouting. Tom, looked at his watch.

"We've still an hour to catch our train," he said. "If you want to soil your hands with this fellow, I've no objections. I know you can take care of yourself, Dick!"

"That's the stuff!" cried the others, dancing around. "Get the gloves!"

Two pairs of gloves appeared as if by magic. Martin divested himself of his coat, and rolled up his sleeves. Dick followed his example.

"I'll second you," said Tom to Dick, and a man named Williams offered to stand in Martin's corner.

An officer named Barclay agreed to referee.

"All I insist upon is that the bout shall last no more than five rounds," said Tom. "We've a train to catch. Besides, Dick can finish him off in less time than that."

Thus it was arranged, and after a consultation between principals and seconds, the man selected to act as timekeeper called time.

Dick and Martin squared off.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FIGHT.

THE crowd cheered as Dick, instead of waiting for his heavier and more mature opponent to come to him, advanced. The lad feinted with his left, and struck with his right.

The blow was blocked, however, and Martin's glove tapped Dick lightly on the cheek. Dick stepped back, and for a moment the two sparred without attempting to deliver a blow.

Martin tired of this directly and came forward with a rush, apparently thinking to push Dick off his feet. The lad side-stepped neatly, however, and struck Martin a stinging blow over the left ear.

"That's the boy!" cried the men surrounding the combatants, and Dick knew there was scarcely a man there who had any use for Martin.

Again Martin rushed and again Dick sidestepped and planted a second blow over his adversary's ear. Then, instead of waiting for Martin to recover himself, the lad followed up his advantage and stepped in close.

"Tap! Tap! Tap! Tap!"

He played a tattoo up Martin's body with both hands.

And the crowd cheered again.

Martin lowered his head, and protecting his face with his gloves, bored in. Dick was ready for this and skipped nimbly around the improvised ring. He stopped once or twice and planted light blows on Martin's stomach.

The round ended with Martin pursuing Dick around the ring.

When time was called for the second round, Dick stepped quickly to the center and met Martin with a straight left as the latter came forward. It was a short blow, but it staggered Martin, and he stepped back.

Instantly Dick was upon him, striking right and left, and for a moment it appeared that Martin could not withstand the attack. But he covered up fairly well, and finally placed himself in a position where he could counter.

A heavy blow struck Dick on the mouth, and a second, under the ear, sent him reeling.

Martin rushed.

"Clinch! Clinch!" came voices from the ringside.

Dick made a desperate effort and succeeded in falling into a clinch, where he hung on until his head cleared in spite of Martin's frantic efforts to shake him off. Then, when they were broken by the referee, he stepped back and sparred carefully. This he continued to do until the round was ended, but it was Martin's round.

"Don't let him get too close," Tom advised his brother during the minute's rest. "Keep him off and you've got him. He's stronger than you, but you can outbox him easily and get a decision on points."

"I don't want a decision on points," declared Dick. "I'm going to knock him out."

"Better be careful or you'll go down for the count yourself," Tom advised.

Dick took it easy the third round, standing Martin off with such pretty boxing that the crowd cheered itself hoarse. This seemed to anger Martin, who made several desperate efforts to end the bout with a knockout.

But Dick weathered the storm, and the third round ended with Dick much the fresher of the two.

"Good work, Dick," said Tom between rounds. "Keep it up and you've got him easily. That certainly was pretty boxing."

But Dick shook his head.

"I'm going to knock him out," he declared.

So far the lad had not put his full strength behind a blow, and in not doing so he had a reason. He figured that Martin would think that he had not the strength to deliver a knockout, and so might leave the opening for which he waited.

But the opening did not come in the fourth round. Dick pushed matters a bit in this round. In the last minute of fighting, he tied Martin into a knot by a

series of dazzling feints, and then delivered a hard left to the body, followed by a stinging right to the nose.

Martin rushed forward and clinched. They were still clinched when the round ended.

"I'll get him this time," Dick told his brother just before time was called. "He figures I can't hit hard enough to hurt him, and he's determined to put me out."

"Better be careful," Tom advised again.

The referee called time for the last round.

"Shake hands," he said as the boxers approached each other.

Dick put forth a glove to follow instructions, but Martin ignored it.

"Shame!" were the cries from the ringside.

Martin flushed a trifle, then advanced with a rush.

Once more Dick sidestepped and planted a neat left just over Martin's left ear. Martin shook his head and bored in.

Dick backed away until he was in a corner of the ring. Then he stepped suddenly forward, feinted once, twice, three times, and struck with his left.

The blow landed flush on Martin's mouth, splitting it. Dick shot his right to Martin's nose with stinging force, and the man staggered. Dick bored in.

Martin fought back as well as he could, but he was plainly no match for Dick's superior boxing.

Dick, with victory within his grasp, threw caution to the winds and rushed his man. Martin landed two clean blows as the lad advanced, but these while they checked the lad, did not stop him.

At close range Dick shot a hard left to Martin's stomach. Martin gasped, bent forward and covered his stomach with his hand.

It was the moment for which Dick had been waiting.

His right fist shot forward with the full force of his shoulder behind it.

"Smack!"

The blow landed squarely on the point of Martin's chin.

"Crash!"

Martin went over backwards, hit the floor with a loud thump and lay still.

Dick stepped back as the referee began to count.

"——eight, nine, ten," the referee droned, "and out."

He stepped to Dick's side and lifted the lad's arm high above his head in token of victory.

And the crowd cheered again.

Dick helped the referee lift the fallen Martin to a chair, where consciousness presently returned to the trooper.

Dick stuck out his hand.

"No hard feelings, I'm sure," he said. "I was lucky. You'd probably beat me next time."

Martin only scowled.

"Don't think I'm through with you," he muttered. "This only adds to the score, and you may be sure that I'll get even with you if it takes a life-time."

"Sorry you feel that way about it," declared Dick, "but I'm ready for you any time."

He walked away and rejoined Tom and Ralph.

Ralph slapped him affectionately on the back.

"You're certainly some fighter," he declared. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"Nor I," said Tom. "I figured you were in for a trimming, and I was going to stop the bout when it got too hot. Why, I don't believe I can outbox you myself."

"I don't believe you can, either," Dick declared.

"You don't, eh?" said Tom with a grin. "Now don't get too cocky just because you were a little lucky. I may have to take you down a peg or two."

Dick grinned.

"I'm ready any time," he said.

The crowd of troopers gathered around the lad with exclamations of delight.

"We'll have to have you in some of our matches," declared one.

"I'm always willing to entertain," said Dick with a smile, "but Tom and the rest of the family might offer objections."

"You can bet on that," Tom interposed grimly.

"Tom," said Ralph pulling out his watch, "it's getting late? Hadn't we better be heading for the station?"

"We certainly had," Tom declared. "Get into your coat, Dick, and come on. We haven't any time to lose."

Dick did so, and the three left the gymnasium and started for the depot.

"You've made an enemy, Dick," said Ralph as they walked along.

"And a bad one, I'm afraid," Tom agreed. "Martin has never been popular with the boys on the force, and he will be even less popular now. This he will attribute to you, Dick, and my advice to you is be on the lookout for some underhanded trick. I wouldn't trust him as far as I can throw a cow by the tail."

"Nor I," said Ralph.

"He can't fool me," returned Dick.

"I wouldn't be too sure," said Ralph. "If he's dismissed from the force, there is no telling to what lengths he may go to get even with you."

"That's so, too," Dick admitted. "I'll be on my guard."

At the station they were joined by the half dozen men who were to accompany them to Ronessen, and fifteen minutes later they were aboard the flyer headed toward Harrisburg.

"We're doing a lot of travelling lately," said Ralph, as they rode along.

"We sure are," agreed Dick.

"More than you'll do again for some time to come, I'll warrant, when this chase is over," declared Tom, who had overheard the conversation. "I shall see to it that you are mixed up in no more of this business."

Neither Dick nor Ralph felt inclined to argue the question. Dick changed the subject.

"We'll stay in Pittsburgh tonight, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes," said Tom. "We'll go out to Ronessen first thing in the morning."

"Well, I hope we find the bandits," said Ralph. "I don't believe they will escape us again."

"You can place a small bet on that, young one," said Tom grimly. "And now if you'll just be quiet for awhile, I'll try to get my thoughts together and outline a plan of campaign."

CHAPTER XXVI.

BACK IN RONESSEN.

"HERE we are in Ronessen again," said Dick. "What's the program Tom?"

It was ten o'clock the morning of the day after they had left Lancaster. The night had been spent in Pittsburgh, and the party, composed of Tom, Dick, Ralph and half a dozen troopers had caught almost the first train for Ronessen. They were now standing upon the station platform in that village.

"Where's that poolroom you were telling me about?" asked Tom.

"Couple of blocks up the street," replied Dick, pointing.

"Guess we may as well head that way then. We may be able to pick up a clue there?"

"Why not first visit the shack where Ralph was held prisoner?" asked Dick.

"Not a bad idea, either," declared Tom. "We'll go there first."

Dick and Ralph led the way.

There was no one in the shack when they arrived, and the interior showed no sign of recent habitation.

"They may turn up, though," remarked Ralph.

"I'll leave three men here anyhow," Tom decided. "They'll be sufficient to take care of any who appear. The rest of us will go to the poolroom."

Again Dick and Ralph led the way. Ten minutes later the six trooped into the poolroom. Dick glanced around for the proprietor who had put him in touch with Bannister several days before. The man was not there. He approached a man behind a cigar case.

"Where's the proprietor?" he demanded.

"I'm the proprietor," was the reply.

"But," said Dick, "I was here several days ago and—"

"Oh," said the man behind the cigar case, "I just bought the place yesterday and took it over this morning. Grimm sold out to me."

"So his name was Grimm, eh?" interposed Tom.

"Yes."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. Probably at home."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"Spring street. I don't know the number, but it's two blocks down. Red brick house on the far side of the street. Spring is the next street above here."

"Thanks," said Tom. "Do you know a man named Bannister?"

"Only by sight."

"Seen him around this morning?"

"No."

"All right," said Tom. "Come, men."

He led the way from the poolroom.

"Tom," said Dick, as his brother was about to lead the way toward Spring street, "why not stop and see my friend the night clerk. He may know something, although he didn't wire me as he promised."

"We'll do that," said Tom briefly, and motioned for his brother to lead the way.

At the hotel Dick learned that the night clerk was sleeping, but when he explained the urgent nature of his request to see him, the day clerk sent a boy to awaken him. The night clerk came down a few minutes later.

"Hello," he said, upon recognizing Dick. "Back again, eh?"

"Yes, and upon the same errand," replied Dick. "Have you seen Bannister lately?"

"Yes. He was in here this morning before seven o'clock."

Tom whistled.

"Must have made fast time," he muttered.

"Didn't hear him say where he was going, did you?" he asked of the clerk.

"No, but he seemed to be in something of a hurry, although he's walking lame. Had two men with him."

"Know where he lives?"

"Somewhere on Spring street. Boards there with a man named Grimm, I believe."

"That's enough," declared Tom. "Come, men, we'll find him there now unless he has moved quicker than I believe he has. Or wait. Dick, you go to the shack on the railroad tracks and get the rest of the men. I may need a full force to handle this gang."

Dick hurried away, and the night clerk addressed Ralph.

"See you came through all right, anyhow," he remarked. "Glad of it."

"Thanks," said Ralph. "Did Bannister seem much hurt?"

"Seemed pretty lame and had a mark on his forehead."

"That must have been where I hit him," said Ralph.

"By the way," said Tom to the clerk, "did you happen to hear Bannister address one of his companions by name?"

"Yes; he called one of them Allen."

Tom whistled again.

"By Jove! The men who robbed the McKeesport bank must have returned," he said. "Apparently they have joined forces. Where can I hire a couple of automobiles around here?"

"Black's garage, straight down this street, one block."

"I'll do that now," Tom declared. "Tell Dick and the others to wait until I come back."

He strode from the hotel.

At the garage he arranged for two high powered automobiles.

"Don't know how long I shall want them," he explained to the man in charge, "nor how soon, if at all. I'm rounding up a gang of bank robbers, and I want these machines ready to give chase if any of them should elude me. I want drivers who are not afraid of speed."

"I'll see that you get them," the automobile man promised. "I'll have them in front of the garage here, ready for use, in ten minutes."

"Good. Have the drivers at the wheels, for if I want the cars I'll want them in a hurry."

"They'll be ready for you."

"Good!" exclaimed Tom again, and hurried back to the hotel.

Dick and the men from the shack had not yet arrived, so Tom sat down to wait for them. They came in a few minutes later, however, and Tom led them from the hotel.

The party experienced no difficulty in finding Spring street, and it was only a short walk to the house that had been described to them as Grimm's.

Tom posted two men in the rear of the house, one on either side, and with the others at his heels climbed the steps. He found no bell, so he rapped sharply on the door with his knuckles.

There was no reply, so after a moment's wait, Tom rapped again.

A window was raised on the second floor, a head looked out and a voice demanded.

"What do you want?"

"I want a man named Bannister, another named Grimm and all other occupants of this house," replied Tom quietly. "Come down and open the door."

The head from the window was hurriedly withdrawn and the window closed with a bang.

"We'll have to look sharp or we'll be trapped," Tom declared. "There is no telling how many there are inside."

He drew back his foot and gave the door a hard kick.

But the door stood firm.

"I can't wait to knock it down," Tom muttered, "so here goes."

He placed the muzzle of his revolver against the door and blew off the lock. Then he pushed the door open and stepped inside, Dick, Ralph and two troopers stepping in after him.

"Jenkins," cried Tom, "you guard the door. The rest of you come with me. Guns ready!"

He darted toward a pair of stairs a few feet from the door, and climbed them rapidly, with Dick, Ralph and the remaining trooper at his heels.

"Maybe they're down stairs," panted Dick, as they ran up.

"I've enough men to take care of them if they are," returned Tom. "But I want to get up these steps. If the stairway is not guarded we may find ourselves in trouble."

Dick recognized the force of this reasoning.

As Tom's head appeared on a level with the floor above, a shot rang out. Neither Tom nor his companions paid the slightest attention to it, and a moment later they were all in the hall on the second floor.

Tom surveyed the hall rapidly.

"In here," he cried, and jumped for a door that stood half open, close to the head of the stairway.

All reached the shelter of the room safely. Tom examined it closely, for he was fearful that one of the bandits might be concealed there.

"We command the stairway, at all events," said Tom, "and we have the house surrounded."

"Maybe so," Dick replied, "but by the same token the bandits also command the steps. 'They can't go down without exposing themselves, but neither can we.'"

"You're right, youngster, up to a certain point," said Tom. "We have friends without to cover us, and they haven't."

"Looks like a deadlock to me," said Ralph. "The bandits, or some of them at least, are in some room

on this floor. They can't come out and we can't go in and get them."

"And we can't starve them out," Dick agreed. "We don't want to wait that long, I'm sure."

Tom went to a window, raised it and called to the trooper who was on guard below.

"Call the rest of the men, and all of you come up here."

"What's the idea, Tom?" Dick wanted to know.

"We'll rush them," was Tom's reply. "There is no use waiting. We'll have to do it some time. The sooner the better, is my idea."

"Right you are," said one of the troopers.

Directly the sound of footsteps were heard on the stairs. Tom poked his head through the door, then withdrew it hurriedly as a bullet skimmed past.

"They're on the job, all right," he declared, "but I've got to protect those fellows coming up the steps."

He poked his weapon round the corner, fired in the direction from which the shot had come, and then leaped into the hall.

For the moment he was master of the situation.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FIGHT IN THE HOUSE.

"THIS way, men!" cried Tom, keeping his eyes on the room across the hall at the top of the stairs, ready to act the instant a head might appear.

The rest of the troopers climbed the steps in safety, and from the room where they had found security a few moments before, Dick, Ralph and the two other troopers also emerged into the hall.

Tom waved Dick and Ralph back.

"Keep out of danger, now," he cried. "There are enough of us here to attend to these fellows without your risking your lives."

Dick and Ralph stepped back several paces, but they remained on the offensive, ready to leap should the occasion offer.

"Ives," instructed Tom, "you and Kellar stand on either side of that door. The rest of us will rush it.

The men indicated took up their positions.

"Now!" cried Tom, and the others hurled themselves against the door.

The door gave way with a crash, and the troopers threw themselves to the floor. Not a man lost his balance, however, and they were immediately

ready for action, in spite of the volley of shots that greeted them.

Taking in the scene at a quick glance, Tom saw that there were at least half a dozen or more of the bandit gang in the room, and recognized the fact that there was sure to be a hard struggle before the robbers were overcome.

"At 'em men!" he cried, discharging his weapon at a tall man directly before him.

But Tom had fired without taking good aim and the bandit did not fall, although his left arm dropped to his side. Deliberately the man covered them, but before he could fire, a trooper dashed forward and struck up the man's arm.

The two clinched, and rolled over on the floor.

The mass of men was so thick that neither side could use firearms without the risk of hitting friend as well as foe. Consequently, the combatants resorted to clubbed revolvers and bare fists.

Tom found himself beset by two men. He dodged the blow aimed at him by the man on the left, and planted his left fist squarely in the man's face. The robber toppled to the floor. At the same moment the other man hurled himself forward with a spring, and Tom felt a pair of hands meet around his throat.

Tom kicked out his foot, and his heavy regulation boot found its mark. The grip on his throat relaxed as the robber reached for his injured shin. Tom's clubbed revolver dropped him to the floor.

Again Tom took in the scene.

Both sides were struggling fiercely. Two troopers lay on the floor, together with three bandits. Tom counted the remaining bandits. There were five of them, while, besides himself, only four troopers survived.

Tom dashed into the thick of the melee.

The impetus of his charge disconcerted the bandits, who gave ground. Immediately the officers were on top of them, following up their advantage.

Suddenly one of the bandits disengaged himself from the mass, stepped back several paces, and before anyone could prevent it, opened fire.

Two troopers dropped, and the bandits, thus heartened, sprang to the attack anew.

In spite of the fact that for the moment his men appeared to be getting the worst of the encounter, Tom deserted them long enough to step back and take a pot shot at the bandit whose fire had been so effective.

The man dropped like a log.

"So much for you," said Tom between his teeth.

There were now four bandits still on their feet, and among these, although Tom did not know the man, was Bannister.

With a sudden rush, Bannister and his followers broke through the officers and dashed into the hall. The troopers were after them with wild cries.

Dick and Ralph, who had followed Tom's in-

structions and kept out of the fighting, were so taken by surprise when the bandits dashed into the hall, that Bannister was half way down the steps before Dick could interfere. Then, both he and Ralph threw themselves into the chase as down the steps dashed the other bandits, with the troopers on their heels.

At the bottom of the steps Bannister staggered, but regained his balance and kept on.

Out into the street ran the bandits, and headed around the house.

There, as the troopers darted after them, Tom saw their objective—a large touring car. Bannister sprang to the wheel and the machine moved off even as the last of the four bandits swung himself aboard.

Bending low in their seats, the bandits escaped the volley of revolver bullets that the officers sent after them.

“Quick!” cried Tom, “Follow me, men!”

He dashed in the wake of the car which was heading in such direction as to take it by the garage where stood the machines that he had provided against just such a contingency.

Dick and Ralph ran after the others.

Directly past the garage sped the bandit car, and by the time the officers, afoot, had reached there and leaped into the first machine, the robbers were some distance ahead and graining at every instant.

There were still four troopers, besides Tom, able to continue the chase. With Dick, Ralph, and the driver of the machine, one automobile was loaded to capacity.

"Can you catch 'em?" asked Tom of the driver as the car began to move.

"I think so," was the reply.

Tom leaned over his seat and addressed Dick, who was trying to make himself comfortable in the rear with the others.

"Pretty big load," he said, "but we can hold the road better if we have to get much speed."

"We'll need the speed, all right," declared Dick.

"Then it's a good thing we are well loaded back there," decided Tom. "We'll get them."

"We've got to get them," Ralph interposed.

The chase was continued in silence.

For perhaps ten minutes the bandit car retained its lead, and then gradually the pursuers began to gain.

From time to time pursuer and pursued flashed by other cars along the road, and several times it was by the narrowest of margins that collisions were averted.

Dick, from his seat in the tonneau, could not but admire the skillful driving of their chauffeur. He seemed as cool as though the car were going only ten miles an hour instead of almost sixty, as at that moment.

"We're gaining, Tom," cried Ralph.

Tom nodded, but made no reply.

But now the road became more crooked. Both pursuers and pursued were forced to slow down for sharp curves, and in this sort of racing the pursuers seemed to have the better hand at the wheel.

Ten minutes later, entering on a straight stretch of road, it was apparent to all that the bandits had regained their early lead.

But now the driver of the pursuing car increased his speed until the machine seemed to be flying rather than running upon a surface.

"Wonder where they're heading for?" said Ralph to Dick, raising his voice almost to a shout to make himself heard.

"Don't know," Dick shouted back. "Just any place to shake us off the trail, I guess."

Suddenly the car ahead was seen to slow down.

Dick and Ralph uttered cries of satisfaction.

The pursuing car sped down upon its prey.

Figures leaped from the bandit auto and darted across the road as the pursuers grew close. The car bearing the troopers also slowed down, and came to a stop several yards from the stationary bandit car.

"Engine trouble, I guess," declared Tom, as he sprang out.

Dick and Ralph, as they alighted with the others, perceived that the spot where they had stopped was

flanked on either side by rather dense clumps of trees. It was into this maze that the bandits had disappeared.

As Tom dashed toward the trees on the trail of the bandits, a spurt of flame came from the woods and his hat leaped from his head.

Tom threw himself flat in the road, and the succeeding volley flew over his head.

To Dick and the others it looked as though Tom had been hit, and they dashed forward with loud cries.

But Tom picked himself up, and motioned the others back.

"Get under cover!" he cried, and himself led the way to the trees on the opposite side of the road to that on which the bandits had sought refuge.

There he called the others around him.

"Time for a council of war," he declared.

"And they'll make off while we talk," Dick protested.

"We won't talk long," said Tom quietly. "Dick, I guess I'll have to depend on you and Ralph a bit after all."

"That's good," said Ralph.

"What shall we do, Tom?" demanded Dick.

"There are seven of us," said Tom, "not including our chauffeur, who will keep out of this."

He paused and considered a moment, then continued:

"Ives, you, Kellar and the boys walk a hundred yards back and cross the road. We'll cover you from here. After you are across, the rest of us will make a dash."

This order was obeyed without question.

Under the cover of Tom and the two troopers, the crossing was made safely, although they drew the fire of the bandits. Then the four stood at the edge of the trees, and watched Tom lead the others across the road.

"Well, we're all across," said Dick. "Now what, I wonder."

"We'll work toward the enemy," said Ives. He led the way.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FIGHT CONTINUES.

THE battle was now on.

Revolvers now began to crack with considerable frequency.

From both sides of the bandits, the troopers advanced.

"Like Guerilla fighting," declared Dick.

"How do you know?" demanded Ralph.

"Well, I never did any of it, if that's what you mean," Dick admitted, "but its my idea of guerilla fighting, just the same."

Every time a man or boy stepped forward, he was careful to take advantage of the shelter offered by the trees.

"These fellows are liable to elude us anyhow," declared Ralph.

"I hope not," returned Dick. "We've had a lot of fun and all that, but it's about time these fellows were rounded up. We——whee! Almost got me that time!"

For a bullet had zipped past his left ear.

Dick jumped for the tree ahead, which he reached safely in spite of the fact that several bullets came dangerously close.

Ralph sprang safely to the shelter of a tree, some twenty yards from his chum.

Peering from his refuge, Ralph saw the form of a man behind a tree perhaps forty yards distant. He was only partly exposed, but taking careful aim and pains not to expose himself, Ralph fired.

The bandit dropped his revolver and wrung his arm in pain.

"I hit him, anyhow, even if I didn't put him out of the fight," declared Ralph to himself.

Tom's forces, in the meantime, had also been advancing cautiously through the woods. Several

times they had drawn the fire of the bandits, but so far none had been hit.

But this good fortune was not to continue, nor could it be expected that it would.

A trooper named Helguson, in attempting to get a bead on one of the robbers, exposed himself too recklessly and was laid low with a bullet through the shoulder. A moment later Tom's other companion also stopped a bullet and fell to the ground.

This left Tom by himself on the far side of the robbers. Profiting by the unfortunate fate of his two companions, he kept out of sight.

At length, however, one of the robbers, unaware of Tom's close proximity, stepped from his place of concealment in an endeavor to locate the officers.

Tom's revolver spoke sharply, and the man toppled over.

"Only three more left," muttered Tom to himself.

The game of hide and seek continued.

For the space of perhaps half an hour not another shot was fired, both hunted and hunters being content to keep their places of refuge and let the others take the next step.

"We're not getting any place this way," muttered Ives to Kellar, who stood behind a tree close to him.

"Those fellows are directly ahead of us, and we've got to get them. 'I'll poke my hat on a stick, and you shoot the man who tries to draw a bead on it.'"

"That old trick won't work," Kellar protested.

"Maybe it won't, then again maybe it will," returned Ives. "It's worth trying, anyhow."

He placed his hat on the end of a stick which he picked up from the ground and cautiously poked it around the tree.

There was a flash of fire in the distance, followed by a sharp report, and the cap leaped from the stick.

But the result was fatal for the man who had fired.

Kellar, keeping close watch, fired the minute the bandit exposed himself, and the man went down.

There were now only two of the bandits able to continue the struggle, and one of these was Bannister.

For the space of perhaps fifteen minutes there was perfect silence. Then, from his place of concealment, Dick saw Tom break from cover and dash toward a tree behind which he knew a bandit was hiding.

Dick raised his revolver to cover Tom's advance, but it was unnecessary. The bandit fired at Tom, but the bullet failed to find its mark.

Chancing to look in Ralph's direction, Dick was astonished to see a figure, some distance beyond Ralph, sneaking from one tree to another.

"That's Bannister, or my name's not Hazelton!" he cried. "How on earth did he get 'way over there?"

Dick raised his voice and called Ralph's attention to the man. Ralph raised his revolver and took a

snap shot. He missed. Bannister reached the next tree safely.

Dick now saw that Tom was advancing again, and he called the attention of Ives and Kellar to the fact.

"If you rush together, you can get him," the lad cried.

"Good advice, Ives," said Kellar. "The boys can protect us from the other."

"Let's go, then," said Ives.

The troopers dashed from their refuges together, and ran toward the tree behind which the bandit was hiding. Tom also darted forth.

Revolvers began to crack again.

Dick, glancing again to where Bannister had so recently disappeared, gave a startled exclamation.

"There he goes!" he cried.

Indeed, Bannister had thrown caution to the winds and was running like mad for the road.

"After him!" cried Ralph.

Both lads sprang from their shelter and dashed forward.

They gained on Bannister, and each fired twice as they ran. Suddenly the bandit stopped behind a tree, and fired at Ralph.

But the lad had anticipated this move, and fallen flat. Bannister turned his revolver on Dick, but he skipped nimbly to shelter.

Again Bannister took to his heels.

This time the lads came together as they took up the pursuit.

After running perhaps twenty yards, Bannister again jumped behind a tree and fired at them.

Again his bullets went wild, and again he ran.

"Wonder where he's heading for?" called Dick, from the tree behind which he had sought shelter."

"He's got something on his mind," Ralph called back.

Suddenly they came to the edge of the road, only to discover that Bannister had disappeared behind the car in which the troopers had pursued the bandits and in which the chauffeur still sat, as though nothing at all was going on.

Out of the range of the boys' guns, Bannister poked his revolver into the face of the chauffeur and ordered him to the ground. The man climbed down without protest.

"Shoot him, Ralph!" cried Dick. "He's out of my range!"

"Mine, too!" Ralph shouted back.

Bannister emptied the contents of his revolver in the general direction of Dick and Ralph, just for the purpose of making them keep to their shelter, and then jumped into the automobile.

Apparently the chauffeur had not shut off his engine, for the machine leaped forward.

Dick and Ralph dashed into the road

"He'll get away!" exclaimed Dick.

He emptied his revolver after the car, but without result.

Ralph also fired after the moving automobile, but with no better effect.

"Come on, Dick," he cried, and dashed toward the abandoned bandit machine, which stood a short distance away.

"No use," said Dick, as he ran after his chum. It won't go or they would not have abandoned it."

Quickly Ralph threw up the hood and looked at the engine.

"Looks all right," he declared.

He examined the gasoline tank and the water supply.

"Full!" he exclaimed.

He leaped into the seat.

"Get in!" he cried to Dick.

The latter obeyed, expostulating.

"I tell you it won't go," he declared.

"And I say it will," replied Ralph.

He threw in the clutch and the car moved!

"What did they want to abandon it for?" demanded Dick, as the speed of the machine increased.

Ralph shrugged.

"You've got me," he confessed. "Doesn't seem to be anything the matter with it."

"Think you can run her all right?" Dick wanted to know.

"Why not? I've run father's car many a time."

"But you can never overtake that fellow."

"He'll know he's been in a race before he gets through," declared Ralph grimly.

"But hadn't we ought to wait for Tom and the others?" demanded Dick.

"If we do this fellow is sure to get away."

"I know. But the others may be in need of us."

"Can't help that now. Besides, there are enough of them to take care of three wounded bandits. No; I believe its up to us to keep track of Bannister, if that's really who the man in the car ahead is."

"It's Bannister, all right," declared Dick. "I am sure of that."

"So am I. That's why I don't want to lose him. I tell you Dick, I am convinced that he's the ring-leader of this gang."

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised. He at least is one of the leaders."

"I believe he's the master mind of the organization," Ralph declared. "He did the thinking and the others simply followed his instructions."

"Maybe you're right. Well, we won't lose sight of him again if we can help it."

"You bet we won't," Ralph agreed.

"Although you probably can't keep up with him," Dick protested.

"I'll keep up with him if this machine will hold together," Ralph declared grimly. "If he can go a

hundred miles an hour, so can I—unless you're afraid."

"Go to it," said Dick. "I can stand it if you can. There's one consolation; if I'm killed I'll have company."

CHAPTER XXIX.

TOM RENEWS THE CHASE.

WHEN Tom, from his place of concealment, saw Ives and Kellar dash directly toward the one remaining bandit, he too left his shelter and sprinted.

The bandit, surrounded, emptied the contents of his revolver at Ives and Kellar, and then stepped forward with upraised hands.

"I surrender," he said.

"Watch him, Ives," said Tom. "Kellar, you come with me. There may be more of them around."

A hurried search revealed the bodies of two bandits on the ground. Tom then turned his attention to the fallen troopers. Both of these, he found, were badly though not necessarily fatally wounded.

"There is one bandit missing," Tom said, when he, Ives and Kellar were together again.

"I saw the boys making after one who was heading toward the road," said Kellar.

"Then we'll go that way, too," Tom decided. "Here, Kellar, lay hold and we'll carry the injured men to the car. Ives, you bring that fellow along."

But when they reached the road, there was no sign of an automobile. The chauffeur sat on an old log, whistling.

"Where are the automobiles?" demanded Tom.

"Gone," said the chauffeur. "One of the bandits dispossessed me, and the two boys followed him in the other car."

Tom was nonplussed.

"We've got to have a conveyance of some kind," he said at last. "Ives, you and Kellar watch the road, stop the first machine that approaches and commandeer it. The wounded have got to be rushed to the nearest hospital. Here, chauffeur, you come with me and help me carry the men to the road."

This was soon done, and the four wounded men were made as comfortable as possible while Tom endeavored to bind their wounds with strips of clothing.

Suddenly Tom was attracted by a cry from Ives.

"Here comes a car," he said.

With Kellar, the trooper took his stand in the middle of the road, and waved his hands. The approaching car slowed down. It was occupied by two men.

"What do you want?" demanded the driver.

"We want your car," said Ives shortly. "We've a couple of wounded men here that require immediate attention."

"But there is not room for all of us," the driver protested.

"Then you'll have to get out," said Ives. "Hurry."

It seemed that the man would protest further, so Ives insisted in the name of the state.

"Hurry!" he said.

Then men alighted, grumbling.

The four wounded men were lifted into the large touring car and made as comfortable as possible. Then Tom took the wheel.

"Climb in," he said to Kellar and Ives.

The men did so.

"How about me?" demanded the chauffeur who had driven them from Ronessen.

"Hang on the step," said Tom.

The car started off, leaving the men who had so recently been passengers protesting at the top of their voices.

"Which way, Hazelton?" asked Ives.

"We're heading toward McKeesport," said Tom, "but I believe Elizabeth is only a few miles away. We'll leave the wounded in the hospital there, turn the prisoner over to the authorities and see if we

can pick up the trail of the other bandit and my brother and his chum."

And this is the program that was followed.

Inquiry in Elizabeth revealed the fact that two automobiles had passed through the little town at breakneck speed, fifteen or twenty minutes before the third car arrived.

"We may as well resume the chase," said Tom, "though there is little likelihood that we shall overtake them."

"Those kids have got a nerve," declared Ives, as the car sped along. "Wonder if they think they can handle that fellow alone?"

"They're liable to try it," declared Tom.

"And they're both liable to get hurt," remarked Kellar.

"That's what I'm afraid of," replied Tom, "which is the reason I'm going to try and get a little more speed out of this boat."

The speed of the car increased until it seemed fairly to fly over the ground.

Meanwhile, what of Dick and Ralph.

In spite of the speed at which Bannister drove his car, Ralph managed to keep it in sight, except at such times as rather sharp curves hid the bandit momentarily from view.

"You're some driver, Ralph," Dick shouted, to make himself heard above the roar of the rushing

wind and the motor. "He won't get away if you can keep this up."

"I'll keep it up, never fear," Ralph shouted back. "We'll catch him all right, barring accidents."

Ahead Ralph saw that they were approaching a settlement. Though the lad did not know it, he was at the outskirts of McKeesport.

The traffic became thicker now, and Bannister was forced to slow down to assure his own safety. Consequently, for a moment or two, the pursuing car gained.

But it was for a few moments only, then Ralph found himself forced to reduce the speed of his car because of the traffic.

From the center of the road to the right, both cars,—pursuing and pursued—rocked crazily as they sped along. Several times collisions were avoided by the narrowest of margins.

Into the principal street of McKeesport dashed Bannister, reducing his speed only slightly. The car driven by Ralph was now less than four hundred yards behind.

Once the boys gained, as Bannister was forced to come to an abrupt stop to avoid crashing into a street car. But a moment later this same car blocked Ralph's way, and Bannister resumed his lead.

And so the chase continued through the city,—pedestrians gasping and scurrying for safety as the

cars sped through the streets,—and directly the road opened beyond.

McKeesport was soon left far behind.

Nevertheless, neither driver was able to get the best out of his car, for the reason that after leaving McKeesport, traffic along the road was considerably congested.

It was ticklish work driving at such speed, but neither Bannister nor Ralph was minded to slow down.

With the cars keeping their relative distance, the chase led through Braddock. Pittsburgh was now less than ten miles away.

"If he gets into Pittsburgh we're likely to lose him altogether, Ralph!" Dick shouted.

"I know it," Ralph shouted back, "but I don't seem to gain any more. Is your gun loaded?"

"No. Why?"

"Then you'd better try and load it. If we come up with him you'll probably need it."

In spite of the rocking of the machine Dick managed to load his revolver, after some effort.

"Pass yours over and I'll load it, too," he called to Ralph.

"Can't take my hand off the wheel going at this speed," Ralph called back. "It's in my coat pocket nearest you. Get it."

Dick did so after some difficulty, and after loading it put it back again.

"We're ready for him, anyhow," he shouted.

"The next thing is to catch him," declared Ralph.

Ahead, Bannister suddenly slowed down again, and Dick and Ralph soon made out the reason.

What appeared to be a procession of automobiles was coming toward them. Ralph knew that for the sake of safety, he, too, should reduce his speed.

Instead, however, the lad shut his lips firmly, and the automobile sped past the machines coming from the opposite direction with the speed of an express train.

This manoeuver, the lads soon saw, had permitted them to gain fully two hundred yards on the bandit car.

The two machines were so close now that Dick and Ralph could see Bannister plainly. From time to time the man looked over his shoulder, and appeared to be making desperate efforts to increase his speed.

But now the boys were gaining steadily.

Ahead loomed a steep downgrade, with an even steeper upgrade beginning at the foot of it. During the chase it had been the habit of both Bannister and Ralph to slow down somewhat for the declines, and Bannister did so now.

Not so Ralph.

The pursuing car crept up on its objective slowly, and after the downgrade had been negotiated suc-

cessfully, the pursuing car overtook the other by leaps and bounds as the upgrade began.

"We'll overtake him before we reach the top!" cried Dick excitedly.

"Right you are!" Ralph shouted back. "Get your gun out and see if you can plug his tire."

Dick wasted no time in argument. His revolver appeared in his hand as if by magic, and he blazed away three times.

And at the last shot he gave an exclamation of satisfaction.

From ahead there came the muffled sound of an explosion, and the bandit car rocked crazily

Bannister steadied his machine, and then, realizing that he was brought to bay at last, applied the brakes.

Before the machine came to a stop, he leaped to the road and started forward at a run.

In one hand he held his revolver, making a desperate effort to load it as he ran. But this is a difficult task, as anyone will tell you who has tried it. The car driven by Ralph was directly behind him.

Ralph brought it to an abrupt stop.

"Jump out, Dick, and cover him!" Ralph shouted.

Dick did not take time to open the door. He sprang over the side, and when he struck the ground he was only a dozen paces from Bannister.

Dick levelled his revolver.

"Hands up!" he cried.

By this time Ralph also had left the car, and was dashing forward.

For a moment it appeared that Bannister would obey the lad's command. His hands went up slightly. Then, apparently changing his mind, he suddenly clubbed his revolver and leaped for Dick.

"Look out!" cried Ralph.

CHAPTER XXX.

END OF THE TRAIL.

BANNISTER'S move was so unexpected that Dick for the moment forgot, apparently, that he was armed. Instead of pulling the trigger he half lowered his arm and stepped back. Recovering himself, he raised his arm again, but before he could fire Bannister closed with him.

The bandit had dropped his own weapon when Dick confronted him, and now, with a swift movement of his arm, he sent Dick's spinning fifteen feet away.

Dick avoided Bannister's first blow by stooping

quickly. Coming up, he struck Bannister heavily in the stomach with his right fist. The man gasped, but stepping quickly forward he aimed a vicious blow at the lad.

This, too, Dick avoided, by sidestepping quickly. Before Bannister could follow it up, Ralph sprang to his chum's assistance.

Ralph struck Bannister heavily in the face, and as Dick stepped out of range of the bandit's fists, Ralph leveled his revolver and cried:

"Hands up there, or I shall fire!"

Bannister was too thoroughly aroused by this time to heed the lad's cry. Instead of raising his hands in token of surrender, he wheeled and rushed at Ralph.

Ralph's revolver spoke sharply. At that range a miss was impossible. The bullet struck Bannister in the left shoulder, and his arm fell powerless to his side.

But even then the bandit continued the fight. He sent Ralph reeling with a powerful blow of his uninjured arm. Following up his advantage, he aimed a second wicked blow at the lad, but this was intercepted by Dick, who sprang forward, striking right and left.

Bannister gave ground.

"Come on, Ralph. We've got him!" Dick cried. The lads rushed in to close quarters.

Bannister struck out viciously with his right, but the boys escaped the blows by quick dodging.

Dick, circling around, at last found the opportunity for which he had been waiting, and sprang in. His arms closed around Bannister from behind.

In vain the bandit tried to shake him off. Dick hung on like a bull terrier, Ralph the while delivering hard blows to Bannister's face and body.

After several minutes of this, Ralph also clinched. Dick thrust a leg behind Bannister, and with a sudden push tripped the man, who fell heavily to the ground.

Both lads pounced on top of him.

"Might as well settle this, I guess," said Ralph to himself.

He raised his revolver, which he had feared to discharge when the fighting became close and brought it down on Bannister's head with a thud.

Bannister gave a groan and lay still.

Dick and Ralph got to their feet and surveyed their fallen opponent.

"Guess that settles it," declared Ralph. "Let's tie him up."

Quickly he shed his coat and shirt. The latter he tore into strips, and with them the lads bound Bannister's hands and legs.

"Now to get him into the car," said Dick.

Bannister was a big man and the lads lifted him

into the car with the greatest difficulty. But at last the job was done.

"Now what?" demanded Ralph. "Shall we go back and look for Tom?"

"Guess we may as well," Dick replied. "I'll sit in the rear seat and guard Bannister when he comes to."

He walked to where his revolver lay and picked it up.

"I'm going to hang on to this this time," he declared.

He climbed into the rear seat, and Ralph again took his place at the wheel. Then he turned the car, and headed it back toward McKeesport.

"Funny we weren't interrupted during the struggle," he called back to his chum.

"Right," Dick returned. "With all the traffic farther back, it is funny there wasn't a machine passing during the melee."

"Tell you what," said Ralph. "It wouldn't surprise me if we came across Tom and the others along the road."

"We might," Dick agreed. "Better keep a sharp lookout."

And this was exactly what happened.

The lads had passed through Braddock again and were drawing close to McKeesport when Ralph caught sight of Tom at the wheel of a passing automobile.

"Tom!" he cried.

But Tom also had seen Ralph, and was bringing his car to a stop. It turned directly, and overtook Ralph soon after he had brought his own machine to a standstill.

"Where've you been?" demanded Tom, rushing up to the car.

"After Bannister," returned Ralph.

"So he got away, eh?"

"No he didn't. Dick is standing guard over him in the rear seat. He's unconscious."

"No he isn't," declared Dick, as Tom peered in. "He's just coming to life again. What do you want to do with him, Tom?"

"I'll take charge of him," was Tom's grim comment. "First, however, we must drive this car back to McKeesport and leave it for the owner." Then, as an after thought: "Where's the car I hired in Ronessen?"

"A few miles farther on, with a blown-out tire."

"Then the chauffeur had better take this car and go after it. You go with him, Kellar, and bring this machine back to McKeesport."

In accordance with these instructions, Tom and Ives climbed into the automobile with Dick and Ralph, and Tom took the wheel from Ralph.

"We may as well complete the journey by automobile," he said. "We can reach Lancaster before morning without hurrying, and I want to turn this

man Bannister over to Captain Mahon personally. He's the head of the gang, you know."

"I didn't know it," said Dick, "but I suspected as much."

"So did I," Ralph agreed.

"Well, its a fact," Tom declared. "The man we captured in the woods this afternoon has confessed."

"And what happened to the others?" asked Ralph.

"They're in the hospital at Elizabeth," Tom replied.

"Were any of our men hurt?"

"Two. I left them in Elizabeth also. They'll be all right in a week or so, I feel sure."

"I'm glad to hear that," declared Dick.

"Same here," Ralph agreed.

The trip to Lancaster was made without further incident. Driving at a moderate gait, it was after daylight when they drove into the little city. They went at once to headquarters, where Bannister's wound was dressed and he was locked up pending the arrival of Captain Mahon several hours later.

In spite of the fact that they were dead tired, neither Dick nor Ralph turned in. Both were anxious to see the Captain and report the success of their enterprise.

It was after eight o'clock when the commander of Troop G reached his office. He immediately had Bannister before him and questioned him at length.

Satisfied at last, he ordered the man remanded to his cell.

"Well, that's the last of the bandit gang," he declared rubbing his hands in satisfaction, and if it's any satisfaction to you boys, I want you to know that it was mainly through your efforts that the band was exterminated, and the ringleader brought to justice."

Both lads blushed.

"Thank you, sir," they said.

"It is I who should thank you," protested Captain Mahon.

"We're glad to have been of service, sir," declared Ralph, "and if we can help in any way at any time, we should be glad to have you call on us."

"I'll remember that," declared Captain Mahon.

Tom, who had been an interested listener, laughed.

"I guess it'll be a long time before you are mixed up in any more such adventures," he said. "I intend making it my business to see that you are kept at home. It's too dangerous work for lads of your years."

"But we didn't get hurt, Tom," Dick protested.

"I'll admit you were pretty lucky," Tom confessed. "But your luck might not hold good next time."

"That sounds as though there might be a next time," said Dick with a grin.

"Well, there won't if I can help it," declared Tom.

"By the way," interrupted Captain Mahon, "there was a long distance call for you last night, Hazelton."

"Where from, sir?" Tom wanted to know.

"Harrisburg. I believe your father was on the 'phone."

"By Jove! I didn't expect he would return for several days yet," said Tom. "Now I'm in for it. I'll have to answer for your absence, Dick."

"Just tell them I was with you, Tom," said Dick. "That will make it all right."

"I'm not sure of that. But I know one thing. You're due for a good wiggling when you get home."

"I guess you're right," said Dick, with a rueful smile.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Ralph interposed, "if my folks had a few things to say, too. Mother didn't know I was going to be gone so long and she is doubtless considerably worried."

"Best thing we can do," suggested Dick, "is to telephone them at once and let them know we're all right. That'll help some."

"Good idea," laughed Captain Mahon. "You may use my 'phone."

The calls were soon made. Dick talked with his father and Ralph with his mother.

"Father was rather inclined to be angry at first," Dick explained to Tom, "but he finally said it might

be for the best. 'Get home as quick as you can,' were his last words."

"Mother didn't seem to mind a whole lot," said Ralph. "She said she was sure she could trust me. I tell you, she's a great mother!"

"Never forget that, my boy," said Captain Mahon; "but now I am going to do something that may make both your parents feel better over what you have done. You know that the governor offered \$5,000 reward for the capture of the Johnstown bank robbers. I feel that you boys should share in that reward, and I am going to give you a letter to the governor to that effect. I want you to call on him at the state house. He's a real man and he'll be glad to see you. I know him well, and he never forgets that he was once a boy."

The lads were so surprised that for a moment neither could reply, but they finally found their tongues sufficient to express their thanks in a suitable manner.

Half an hour later, with Captain Mahon's letter in their possession, they left Lancaster, with the best wishes of the captain and all the troop.

Captain Mahon's prediction proved perfectly correct. When the parents of the boys read his letter to the governor, they were more than pleased that their sons had been instrumental in bringing such a dangerous band of criminals to justice.

They were doubly pleased, when, on the following

day, the lads were received by the governor in the executive office and not only given a voucher for \$500 each, but publicly thanked by him for their courage and good judgment under most trying conditions.

The *Patriot* published a full account of their adventures and also of their interview with the governor, so that the boys felt that they had really earned the right to be called The Boy Troopers.

The further adventures of the lads in aiding to bring evil doers to bay will be found in a succeeding volume entitled The Boy Troopers in the Northwest! or With the Canadian Mounted Police.

THE END.

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